



The Experience of Hijab

Sara Harold

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Al-Falah Foundation

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I pray that Allah, *Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala*, will make our *hijab* a source of blessing for us and a means to win His favour.

Preface

Women are central elements in shaping society throughout the world as the main guardians of tradition, continuity and standards. However in many societies the pressures on women are considerable to shift those core values that were passed down to them. Especially now, there is a pressure to live up to a certain contemporary standard of outward appearance.

The modern trend is to look youthful, beautiful and slim for every passer-by one may happen to meet and to meet with the approval of the purveyors of the modern standard in relationships, at work and out and about in society. Women may have to lay themselves open to the scrutiny and intrusive glances of anyone who would size her up and accept or reject her according to some arbitrary standards which ignores what is of true value to the betterment of society.

The *hijab* culture engendered by the teachings of Islam takes away this pressure to keep up with every passing trend of physical attractiveness. It covers a woman's private self from her public face. This enables men and women to be on a more equal footing in society. The Islamic dress presents the woman first and foremost as a human being with a personality and a set of core values, not someone to be judged by the harsh standards of the changing trends of acceptable physical appearance.

In this book we discover how Muslim women came to value the once 'dreaded headscarf' and Islamic dress as a way of projecting a image of dignity and respectability in the outside world whilst at the same time enhancing her inner integrity and drawing strength from her placing her connection with her Creator, Allah (Exalted and Glorified be He) the central element in her life.

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General Director

Sheikh Muhammad `Abdu

Introduction

Whenever two or more Muslim women gather together, at one time or another the subject invariably turns to *hijab*. We want to know what we are supposed to wear. How does it compare with other women? Are those women wearing the *niqab* (face cover) going too far; or making things difficult for other women? Are women who neglect *hijab* letting us all down; or setting a bad example? We want to know the best age for our daughters to make their debut with a head-scarf. We talk about the trials and tribulations of our first experiments with *hijab* when we have made the decision to put it on. In some less frequent cases, we want to make others understand our decision to take it off.

Of course there are some Muslims among us who scold us when we go off on a *hijab* tangent. I have done it myself. Sometimes there is a sense of exasperation with women who squabble over hem-lines and scarf colors, that they are neglecting the real issues. We have lived through attacks on Muslims all over the world since I embraced Islam in 1990. We have seen carnage in Bosnia and Iraq. Most of the Muslim world is living under oppression or in poverty. Many of our people are uneducated or under-educated or educated in fields that are of little benefit to the betterment of society. We share the woes of the West, fighting crimes, breakdown of relationships, drugs and

unemployment. While Muslims in the West struggle to establish Muslim schools, ponder how far they can participate in the established political process and put out the fires that flare up all around them, it would seem that *hijab*, what women wear, is a triviality.

But this is to ignore the significance of *hijab*. It is really more than a piece of cloth on the head. In many places there is no symbol more potent than that piece of cloth. The *hijab* shouts loud about the kind of people we want to be and the kind of society we want to build.

The significance of the *hijab* as a symbol is clear in those countries which have tried to discourage it or to ban it. When Ataturk tried to secularize Turkey at the beginning of the twentieth century and undermine the attachment of the people to Islam, he outlawed Islamic dress for men as well as women. He didn't want people to look like Muslims in the street. Even today Turkish women find it difficult to enter higher education or employment if they wear *hijab*. Go to any Muslim country and see the women who work in public and you would be hard pressed to find one wearing *hijab*. It is rare now to see a female presenter on television in an Arab country wearing *hijab*. They fear the *hijab* looks backward and dowdy. There may be one or two brave enough to wear their *hijab* with pride but more commonly bouffant hair and lavish make up are the order of the day.

In France, they too have had their battles with those women who refuse to take off their head-scarves in school. Protests, court cases and tears. All over a piece of cloth? Yes, it is so much more than a piece of cloth.

That is why I wanted to explore the issues surrounding *hijab* in more depth. I wanted to put down on paper some of the experiences I have heard about from my sisters and uncover some of the attitudes to

hijab. I wanted to know what non-Muslims really thought of *hijab* and what went through their minds when they saw that covered woman looming up before them. I wanted to know what kind of attitudes Muslim women had experienced themselves from non-Muslims. Finally, I wanted to explore some of the prevailing attitudes amongst ourselves.

I decided to limit myself mostly to the experience of women in Britain, especially Scotland since this was where I was living for most of my time as a Muslim. I used reports in Muslim publications to gauge the more high profile cases whilst I carried out a small scale survey of employers and some establishments to find out their policy on *hijab*. I wanted this to be a personal study which really tries to get to the core of the meaning of *hijab* which is why I have limited the scope of this very vast subject which has been dealt with in a much more scholarly fashion over the centuries.

Most of my information came from questionnaires responded to by Muslim women of various backgrounds who were living in the UK, some as students or the wives of students and others who were permanently settled.

The result was a rather interesting range of experiences and attitudes which go towards this look at the experience of *hijab*.

Chapter One

The Rulings

If there is one area of Islamic law that is not neglected amongst the modern jurists, it is the area of women's dress. Books and tracts abound addressed to women to tell us the correct mode of Islamic dress.

The Qur'anic verses relating to women's dress outside the home or in front of non-*mahram* men (men that they could marry) are well known.

The translation of the meaning in the translation by `Abdullah Yusuf `Ali runs:

﴿And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty, 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 except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brother's sons or their sister's sons or their women or the slaves whom their right hand possess or male servants free of physical needs or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex, and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And Oh ye

believers turn ye all together toward Allah that ye may attain bliss. ﴿

(An-Nur: 31)

This is verse 31 of surah an-Nur which incidentally is preceded by a verse addressed to the believing men also telling them to lower their gaze and guard their modesty. So in this instruction towards greater purity of social relations outside the family circle, the onus is put on a man not to look at a woman's attractiveness and for a woman not to show it off.

A key point to take from this verse is that women are instructed by Allah (Exalted and Glorified be He) to make sure their head-cover is covering the neck and chest area. Exactly what this entails is to be discussed further later on. This is what is generally referred to in the modern understanding of *hijab* in the English speaking world.

It is always useful to remember that the Qur'an is an Arabic revelation and Muslims believe it to be divine. It cannot ever be translated as such because the language of revelation is integral to the meaning. The translations are obviously invaluable to those who don't know Arabic as a gateway to the Qur'an but it is important for Muslims to focus on what the Arabic words precisely mean because this is vital to get a clear idea of the nature of the commands and prohibitions that Allah has given us.

In fact *hijab* has become almost synonymous with the head-scarf when in fact the various pieces of clothing have specific names in the Arabic language and '*hijab*' is the word which rather refers to the whole ensemble of the required Islamic dress and its effect in screening what is underneath. The head-cover is known as the '*khimar*' and the area to be covered is '*juyubihinna*.'

The second key point is the listing of the men who are forbidden to a woman in marriage and they correspond to the opposite gender for men. These are the woman's *mahrams* whom she cannot marry, except her husband of course whom she is already married to. These are the men she can appear in front of without *hijab*.

In another verse we read the Yusuf `Ali's translation of the meaning:

﴿ Oh Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. ﴾

(Al-Ahzab: 59)

In this verse, Yusuf `Ali uses the word 'abroad' in the old fashioned sense, meaning outside the home and not to a foreign country in his explanation of the meaning in parenthesis.

The above verse is the one which brings in the factor of the need for the Muslim woman to be recognized as such when outside and that her clothes be distinctive to mark her out as a Muslim.

The distinguishing factor in this case is the wearing of an over-garment known in Arabic as a '*jilbab*' and sometimes referred to as an '*abaya*' or '*burqa*' or '*chador*'. The women are told in this verse to let down this garment over themselves and it has been up to the scholars down the centuries to describe exactly what is referred to using their comprehensive knowledge of Qur'an, the context of the revelation of each verse, the *hadith* or sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the practice and sayings of his companions and the later generations. This we will look at in a little more detail presently.

In the same surah, verse 53, Allah (Exalted and Glorified be He) instructs the believers about entering the Prophet's house. Here is a translation of the meaning as rendered by Al-Hilali and Khan.

﴿ Oh you who believe! Enter not the Prophet's house except when leave is given to you for a meal (and then) not (so early as) to wait for its preparation. But when you are invited, enter, and when you have taken your meal, disperse, without sitting for a talk. Verily, such (behavior) annoys the Prophet and he is shy of (asking) you (to go), but Allah is not shy of (telling you) the truth. And when you ask (his wives) for anything you want, ask them from behind a screen, that is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. ﴾

(Al-Ahzab: 53)

The verse goes on to prohibit anyone marrying the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) after his death because of their exalted position as wives of the highest of humanity and their heavy responsibility to the growing Muslim society.

The believers of Medina were regular visitors to the house of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and all the members of the household were in such great demand that it began to impinge on the personal lives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his family. Also some of the men used to be curious about the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and wanting to see them in person. To ensure they concentrated on the matter in hand, namely the knowledge they were seeking, it was commanded that they shouldn't any longer speak to them directly but from behind a screen and this is the word '*hijab*'.

Another verse which interests us in the discussion of *hijab* is in surah al-Ahzab, verse 33. A translation of the meaning runs;

﴿And stay in your houses and do not display yourselves like that of the times of ignorance and perform as-Salat and give zakat and obey Allah and His messenger.﴾

(Al-Ahzab: 33)

The days of ignorance refers to the period before the coming of Islam with the revelation of Qur'an and prophethood of the seal of the Prophets, Muhammad (peace be upon him). During this pre-Islamic time, although the vestiges of the Abrahamic monotheism remained, Mecca was a pagan society and women used to display themselves openly outside in a society where their status and worth came from the men they were attached to.

This verse refers to the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) primarily as it comes after the previous verse, number 32 which is addressed to the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Its meaning is translated by Al-Hilali and Khan:

﴿Oh wives of the Prophet. You are not like any other women.﴾

(Al-Ahzab: 32)

However, as the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) were also the model for the believing women, it is thought that this is the guidance calling for the establishment of a home based role for women in the society, that they make the home and maintain the home and provide the stable centre or nucleus around which the activities of society move. Their role was not to go out to make a dazzling display but to provide a firm anchor for the members of their family.

Moving on to the secondary body of revelation, the Sunnah which is the collection of the sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as well as his practical example and his approval or disapproval of the actions of others, we have further elucidation of the question of dress.

Narrated `A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) that when Asma' the daughter of Abu Bakr came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) while wearing thin clothing, he said, "*O Asma'! 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.

A similar tradition is narrated that the niece of `A'ishah named Muzaynah came to her and when the Prophet (peace be upon him) turned away his face `A'ishah said "she is my niece and still a girl."

The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied that when a girl comes of age it is unlawful for her to display any part of her body except her face and hands.

In Islamic law, the coming of age for a young woman is the time of her menarche. The age varies somewhat from one society to another and from one time in history to another and there are several variables which can affect the age of the onset of puberty.

These *hadiths* give us a more detailed idea of what constitutes the "*awra*" for Muslim women, i.e. the area that is to be covered and there have been differing opinions on this as we shall see. The inference from this often quoted first *hadith* is that the '*aura*' for a woman in front of non-*mahram* men is all but the hands and face. From this *hadith* concerning Asma' we also have an indication that fabric for clothing should not be transparent or clinging but able to cover the shape of the body.

Another *hadith* from `A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) describes the believing women attending the *fajr* (dawn) prayer covered with their veiling sheets. This gives an indication of the type of over-garment and head-cover to be worn. The *hadith* refers to the time of the *fajr* prayer which is to be performed while it is still quite dark and the women were not recognized when returning from the

mosque. Some believed this was because they also covered their faces whilst others say this was in the context of the times for prayer to indicate that it was still too dark to recognize people in the street.

In another *hadith*, `A'ishah describes the response of the women to the revelation of the verse about drawing their head covers over their chests: "May Allah have mercy on the early immigrant women. When the verse '*that they should draw their veils over their bosoms*' was revealed they tore their thick outer garments and made veils from them." (another rendering is that they covered themselves with the torn parts) A modern mufti, the late Sheikh Sayyid ad-Darsh in his book about the debate between advocates of *hijab* and *niqab* quotes this *hadith* with the continuation; "And in this state offered their prayers behind the Prophet (peace be upon him) as silently as if crows were seated on their heads."

Elsewhere a *hadith* is quoted from another of the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) Umm Salamah (may Allah be pleased with her) where she is reported to have narrated that when the verse 'that they should cast their outer garments over their person' was revealed, the women of the Ansar⁽¹⁾ covered themselves so tightly when going out of their homes that it looked as if some bird was sitting on their heads. They put black sheets of cloth over themselves.⁽²⁾

When one of the companions, `Ubaydah ibn Sufyan ibn al-Harith (may Allah be pleased with him) was asked by one of the '*tabi'in*'⁽³⁾

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1. The "Ansar" were the residents of Medina, the city of the Prophet's migration and the first establishment of the Muslim community. They helped and welcomed the "*muhajirun*" or immigrants from Mecca and together built the new society.
 2. This was quoted from the '*tafsir*' or explanation of the Holy Qur'an by the famous classical scholar, Ibn Kathir.
 3. *Tabi'in* refers to the members of the generation who lived right after the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

about how the *jilbab* was to be worn, he demonstrated by pulling a sheet of cloth over his head covering the entire body leaving just the left eye uncovered.

From the *hadiths* we can get a mental picture of the type of clothing that the early Muslims used to wear from which we can take our example.

During our discussion of *hijab* I will sometimes be using the Arabic words '*muhajjaba*' (pl. *muhajjabat*) which means a woman wearing *hijab* and *munaqqaba* (pl. *munaqqabat*) which means a woman wearing *niqab* (face-cover), for reasons of brevity and ease of reference.

Chapter Two

The Interpretations

The rulings are to be found in the Qur'an and Sunnah. However, we need to consider the interpretation by people of knowledge that translates the revelation from Allah into something which can be practically applied through all the ages until the Day of Judgement.

The believing woman is at liberty to assess these opinions and check the reasoning behind them. Even though all believers have direct access to Qur'an and the Sunnah, we are advised to take expert opinion regarding the application of Islamic law. The reason we refer to people of knowledge is that they have devoted time to acquainting themselves with the wider body of knowledge. They will have deeper understanding of the meanings and connotations of Arabic words, about the usage at the time of revelation, about the various perspectives on an issue from as wide an angle as possible. This means that they will know that the Prophet (peace be upon him) may have done one thing on one occasion and something else at another time. They will be aware of the latest ruling on an issue in the history of revelation which abrogates previous rulings. They will also have studied the practice of the companions and especially the four rightly guided 'caliphs' who were the leaders of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Our predecessors, the scholars who had deep knowledge and '*iman*' (faith) realized the enormity of their responsibility in interpreting Qur'an and Sunnah for the believers. They feared Allah enough not to give opinions out of fear or favour regarding some created being. Their motivation was love for Allah and desire to please Him and to help others do the same. This is the essence of the good '*faqih*' (exponent of Islamic law) and someone from whom a Muslim can take advice.

This is why in the modern context, it is important for Muslims to know the background of anyone who rules for them. Even better is to see them living Islam in the way they tell others to live it. If they and their families set good examples, the people can have confidence in their decision. It is worth remembering always that the scholars of our times stand on the shoulders of the giants who went before them. The hardest and most painstaking work on interpretation of Qur'an and Sunnah has been done before us, by the grace of Allah, before this machine age with its myriad distractions. Our purest example goes back to the Prophet himself (peace be upon him) who received the revelation and lived it for us. We thank Allah for every single link in the chain that got any piece of the knowledge to us today about the example of the Messenger of Allah, Muhammad (peace be upon him).

We are going to discuss three aspects of Islamic dress which can be said to be the key areas when trying to apply the revelation.

- **How the head-cover is to be worn.**
- **The nature of the over-garment.**
- **The covering of the face.**

a) The head-cover

As we have said, the word '*hijab*' when used in English speaking discourse is now synonymous with a kind of head covering or scarf. Whenever I asked questions to my respondents about *hijab*, this is what they always understood by the term '*hijab*'. When a woman asks, 'where's my *hijab*?' in English, she is referring to the head-scarf.

The transformation brought about by covering the hair is sufficiently dramatic to make the donning of a head-scarf such a significant event in the life of a Muslimah and any controversy or hostility to the *hijab* is directed at this covering of the hair.

The scholars have debated the extent of the area to be covered by the actual *khimar* or headpiece. For some it is the neck and part of the upper chest whilst others say that the scarf should extend over the breasts.

One of the main functions of the *khimar* is to cover a woman's adornments and to help her conform to the teaching that she should not show them off in front of non-*mahram* men. One of the points of difference amongst scholars is what is referred to in the phrase; '*except what must (ordinarily) appear thereof*'.

The question was; what is this area or object which can be shown? Some have explained this to mean unintentional revealing of the body and adornments when the wind blows. Sheikh Darsh states that two companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him), Sa'id and Ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with them) explained that it in fact referred to one's clothes. Ibn 'Abbas and Qatadah were of the opinion that it included antimony or kohl on the eyes, rings and hand-paint. Ibn 'Umar explained that it referred to the face, hands and ring. Some scholars also included the feet in what could be seen. The rationale for

the uncovering of face and hands was that this was normal when women were buying or selling or perhaps acting as witnesses.

The point was that women were not supposed to deliberately go out to entice men and to show off their beauty and adornments.

b) The over-garment

To mark themselves out as Muslim women and to give a signal that they had high morals and standards women were instructed to wear their over-garment when going outside.

Most scholars have described this to mean a fully covering cloak or over-garment which covers the whole body including the woman's ordinary clothes and adornments.

Some have said that it instructs women to let down a part of this garment over the face and as we saw in the previous chapter, when one of the companions was asked about it, he showed how the *jilbab* is a fully covering sheet type garment which is drawn over the face leaving an eye open to see the way.

It has been agreed by the scholars that the garments should not be transparent so as to reveal what is underneath. Nor should they be so tight as to outline the woman's shape. Their purpose is to disguise the shape. Also the garment should not be so attractive itself in color or design that it ends up drawing more attention to the woman. Its purpose is to allow her to blend into the background without drawing unnecessary attention to herself, to allow her to blend in with other woman and to make a distinction between women who go out for their needs and do not want to attract attention and those women whose intention is to show themselves off or to entice men. The garment is also required to be distinct from the dress of non-Muslims. While

abayas and *jilbabs* are distinctively Muslim garments which allow women to be known as Muslims, in the colder countries of the north, women often use their over-coat as their over-garment. In the case of the warm over-coat it is the length which makes it distinctive for a Muslim woman. In fact, Muslim women living in the West have seen the need to customize clothes of the right fabric for the climate but of an inadequate design in order to make them more distinctly Muslim.

Another requirement in the dress of the Muslim woman is that her garments should not resemble those of men.

The behavior of the woman is supposed to chime with what she is saying on the outside by her dress. She doesn't walk in a suggestive manner. She keeps her voice low and again does not use flirtatious language or tone. She keeps her eyes lowered. She does not deliberately draw attention to herself.

In this way she interacts with men outside, her brothers in Islam, members of her community, the husbands, fathers, brothers and sons of her sisters in Islam and her neighbors. The *hijab* keeps a boundary between them, which allows them to interact on a public level without compromising the integrity of the private sphere.

The scholars have explained that women can go out for their needs. In modern society this may mean to shop, meet friends, for leisure, to take children out or do any community or paid work. Also, one of the obligations of Muslim women is to preserve ties of kinship; so it might include visiting family.

The description of the *hijab* then is not limited to the head-scarf but extends to a complete mode of dress and behavior. The on/off switch for *hijab* is the presence or imminent presence of a non-*mahram* man.

This means that if a non-*mahram* comes to the home to sit with a woman and her *mahram*, if she is to be present at the gathering, she puts on her public face within her private home.

Sometimes a family will be sharing a home so that a woman may live with her brother-in-law who is not her *mahram*.

There is a *hadith* which talks about the dangers of non-*mahram* men and women being in privacy together which warns about the relationship of a married woman with her male in-laws.

Narrated `Uqbah ibn `Amir: Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said, "*Beware of entering upon the ladies.*" A man from the Ansar said, "Allah's Messenger! What about the in-laws of the wife (the brothers of her husband or his nephews etc.)?" The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied, "*The in-laws of the wife are death itself.*"

This stands as a warning for women who live very closely with their husband's brothers or other non-*mahram* male relatives. It is a common family model in the Muslim world that married sons both live in their parents' home. Here at the interface of the private and public spheres it becomes more difficult to separate what is private from what is public. The wives are at home but cannot be completely at ease as they would be with *mahram* relatives. Their responsibility is to maintain the integrity of two marriages and family units within one home.

Every woman needs a private non-*hijab* space whether it is her whole flat or home or her bedroom in an extended family or even a curtained area of a hut or shack for the very poor. This is where one is free to express one's whole being. The role of men in Islam gives them the responsibility to leave the house regularly for prayer, to earn a living for their families, to do *jihad* and *da`wah* and to interact with

their brothers and the public thus freeing up more private space for the women.

When any men other than a woman's husband is present she puts on more covering and adopts more modesty, for example for other *mahram* relatives like her father and brothers. Then as she steps out of the house she puts on more covering and this is where the over-garment comes in.

c) The covering of the face

There is a respected opinion amongst a group of Muslim scholars that a woman should also cover her face when going outside and in front of non-*mahram* men.

The inference is drawn from the verse in which the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) were told to address visitors to the house from behind a screen. These scholars also state that the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) covered their faces in front of non-*mahram* men after that as did some of the women companions.

As we have seen the description of the wearing of the *jilbab* includes the covering of the face except the eyes or one eye to see the way.

It has been stated that *niqab* or the face-cover comes in the category of highly commended in Islamic *shari`ah* whereas it is not considered compulsory except by a few interpreters. However the other requirements of covering the hair and body are seen as compulsory (*wajib*) and this is agreed upon by all the major schools of thought.

Addressing non-*mahram* men from behind a screen was however required of the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The

requirement was revealed after his marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh (may Allah be pleased with her). Due to their exalted position as wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him), it was more appropriate for them to address men who were not their *mahrams* from behind a screen. There were many reasons why men would come and consult with the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him), especially after his death. `A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) was one of the Prophet's wives who lived for many long years after his death and became a very important transmitter of the sayings of the Prophet (peace be upon him). She lived very closely with him during the time when verses of Qur'an were being revealed containing many injunctions on how to lead an Islamic life. `A'ishah also had access to knowledge about the Prophet's private life especially regarding how to conduct oneself in the home. As we have said, so that the men coming to ask questions could concentrate on the knowledge being transmitted without being distracted by their curiosity as to the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him), they were told to speak from behind a screen. This also helped the women maintain a special rule that was given to them, which was that they could not marry anyone else having been wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and having been given a privileged position by Allah (Exalted and Glorified be He) which entailed certain responsibilities to the *ummah* (Muslim nation). They are all known as 'mothers of the believers' and they had a role in helping to guide the Muslims and to help preserve the revelation through memorization and transmission.

The advocates of the face-cover among the scholars also take a view on other issues which err on the side of greater seclusion for women. The requirement for the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to stay quietly in their homes is seen as a model for believing

women in general. One of the quoted statements is that a woman leaves her father's house for her wedding and only goes out again in her coffin.

In practice, of course Muslim women who follow this opinion go out more than once in their lives. Women are required to perform *Hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca and it is recommended for them to attend 'Id prayers. Going out for their needs may include the doctor or the shops, sometimes in the company of a *mahram* if it is outside her immediate area, or to visit relatives.

In British society homes are not designed for a woman to have all her needs at home. Nor is the climate suitable for sitting in one's own yard or garden very often. In Muslim countries where female seclusion is the norm, homes are designed to facilitate this. Saudi Arabia is a case in point. This is a relatively wealthy country where the women are not generally forced by economic circumstances to work outside the home, as it is the case in many poorer Muslim countries. So it is easier for Saudi and Gulf women to be home-based. A section of the society is wealthy enough to have servants to cater for all their needs outside the home.

A typical Saudi home has an enclosed private courtyard, garden or balcony where women can get fresh air and sunlight without being seen from outside. The house has areas where male guests from outside can be received separately without needing to come near the private areas of the house. Many services can be brought to the house for women such as hairdressing, medical and maternity care and sales women can come to visit. The car in the countries of the Gulf often acts like a mobile home. Windows are shaded so that the passengers cannot be seen and there are segregated markets, banks, schools and other institutions so that women can go from home to car to market for

example without seeing a man or being seen. Women who do have to walk in the streets screen their whole face with an extra piece of black cloth attached to their head gear. The *`abaya* goes with the ensemble so that when going outside the woman covers her whole outfit in the black cloak and her coiffured hair and made-up face with the head and face gear so that she can get ready to go out for a party or gathering and just take off the *`abaya* when she arrives.

Another aspect regarding the movement of women is the requirements for travel outside of one's town. Some of the scholars have said that a woman can go out alone in her own vicinity but must be accompanied by a *mahram* if travelling out with that vicinity and some have stated the exact distance beyond which a *mahram* is required.

There have been scholars who have made an exception for older women that they are permitted to travel in a group with other women when a *mahram* is not present.

The injunctions about travelling alone are not widely known about amongst Muslim women in the West and much of the Muslim world. It is the fear that their freedom could be seriously restricted which underlies the wariness of some Muslim women towards the *niqab* and what goes with it in terms of greater seclusion or what is known in Pakistan as 'purdah'.

There is another *hadith* in which it is narrated that Fatima (may Allah be pleased with her) the daughter of the Prophet (peace be upon him), said that it is better for a man not to see a strange woman and vice versa. Scholars take this to mean that avoidance of seeing the face of outside women is better for men. The women who wear *niqab* often say that they try to emulate the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and feel closer to Allah in doing so.

Scholars also argue that the face is the most beautiful and attractive aspect of a woman and that it would make sense to cover it so as not to attract men unnecessarily.

Opponents of face-veiling amongst the ordinary public have argued that the adoption of the face cover was a later development in Muslim history after the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The claim is that Muslims were emulating the upper class women of the Byzantines and full veiling was a way of setting upper class Muslim women apart.

In his discussion of the topic, there was an inference by Sheikh Darsh that it was very easy for middle-class women in the Gulf to take on this secluded lifestyle but not so easy for working class women and women who had to do rural work outside or engage in public life.

Despite the differences, there is no reason why advocates of face covering and those who leave the face open cannot co-exist comfortably.

For example, at some Muslim conferences it is the practice to provide seating for women alongside men, assuming the majority of women will be wearing *hijab*. This enables the women to participate without a barrier, whilst a section of the room is closed off to cater for the women who do not like to be seen by men even when they are wearing *niqab* and a section for men who likewise do not want to see non-*mahram* women in the room even if they are wearing *hijab*. This enables everyone to attend the gathering and allows for different sections of the community to interact and possibly learn from each other.

There is always the option to organize single sex gatherings for those who prefer them or for occasions when it is more appropriate to

operate in a single sex environment such as social gatherings. What is important is that the options are left open and that with some imagination people can be considerate to the feelings of others without falling into argumentation.

Part of the blessing of the revelation is that there has always been room for difference of interpretation and changing emphasis to fit different times and different places.

Despite what some sisters may demand, that we all be prescribed what one of my correspondents described as 'a kind of school-uniform for Muslim women', there is no 'one size fits all' for Muslim women.

The Muslim woman and her men-folk are obliged to find out by tradition, by study, by dialogue and by reflection just how women are to present themselves in the world outside.

Chapter Three

The Blessings

The *hijab* was given as a blessing to enable women to make a smooth transition from public to private life and to guard what is private from public view in order to maintain the integrity and sanctity of each individual woman and the home circle she inhabits.

How does she do this? Both by her dress and her behavior. The men who belong to the category for whom *hijab* is not required are pointed out in detail in the verse of the Qur'an we looked at. The *hijab* is for the men that a woman could marry. A woman's *mahram* relatives have their place in her private sphere but only one man has ultimate access to her private space and that is her husband. This means the position of a woman within marriage is exclusive to other men. That which excludes what comes from outside protects what is inside the circle of exclusion and magnifies any influence a man can have on the mind, body and soul of his wife and both of them on their children. It is also the case for men who have more than one wife. The exclusion of outside interference from other men makes for true nurturing and increases human care and concern for the other. Because outsiders do not have any right or responsibility towards the private domain, the responsibility and influence of the couple is magnified. Thus, the bonds between couples become stronger.

In His injunctions, Allah (Exalted and Glorified be He) has closed all doors to illegal relationships of fornication and adultery. These sins begin with a simple glance followed by increasing intimacy. The *hijab* stops the first step which can lead to this snowball effect which may lead to a man going off with his neighbor's wife, one of the greatest crimes in Islam.

It is sometimes forgotten that *hijab* acts also as a protection for men and other women. There are some women who are voracious for the attention of men and do their utmost to attract strangers. It is mentioned in the *hadith* of the Prophet (peace be upon him), that *Shaytan* (Satan) runs in the blood, a fact which we can understand better with modern knowledge of biology. *Shaytan* is understood in the Islamic paradigm to be the being who tries to steer mankind from the true course, to tempt and whisper to him and to drag him always to his lower self. In our bloodstream there are attracting pheromones which are at the base of what is known as the chemistry of attraction between men and women. This is why men, especially are susceptible to being distracted by attractive women and this distracts them from their true purpose which is looking after their own family. It is an injustice to the wife of a man that women outside are free to prey on her husband in this way distracting him from her, his children and his other responsibilities. Such women are easily bored and soon look for new targets. A *hijab* culture makes this kind of stealing from other women unacceptable.

For those who challenge the rationale of covering one's attractions let us consider the behavior of women who want to attain the opposite effect of Muslim women. They hitch up their skirts, drop their necklines, highlight their mouths and cheeks, bush out their hair, wear perfume and walk and talk seductively outside the home. This is now

the norm in European society because restraints have come undone. It is in this context that the *hijab* has come to be seen as so abnormal in non-Muslim society. The integrity of the family cell has become diluted and has ceased to matter as much to a large section of the society so that women are compelled to attract indiscriminately. In some cases, children are born without there being a proper base of family support in place so that the care of the child could be threatened at every stage. The new-born child is born with urgent needs and the pressures on the mother are intense. If she has been left alone, she has to nurture the child as best she can, the maternal instinct being very strong but very often it is at the expense of her own well being. The *hijab* protects from this type of randomness in the setting up of relationships so that the family may be built on solid foundations. A woman then will not have to leave the future of her personal life to chance but has the assurance of vetting and accreditation for her future life partner and help with the active seeking of someone to marry.

Women who don't wear *hijab* and don't understand it may feel they are in control in the public situation but they don't realize that they are attracting undesirable men as well as those who attract them. A woman may attract men who will do her harm or inadequate men who have been unable to establish a partnership of their own. Finally, they end up destroying each other. Neither men, women or children get what they are entitled to in this framework.

The moral advantages of Islamic dress are not limited to maintaining the chastity. Islamic dress helps to regulate women's behavior for the good as they cross that boundary between the private and public world. With her head-cover drawn over her chest and heart, a woman moves out of the world where the heart rules where she

loves and is loved, is known for who she really is and can be free to express her inner self into the uncertain domain of public life where strangers mingle. Here the head must rule. She cannot afford to have strangers playing on her emotions to part with her precious money, her precious time which should be reserved for her own family and community. The Muslim woman wraps her private self under her outer-garments away from the sight of those who have nothing to do with her. She only reveals her hidden self in the right environment. Women have a tendency to give too much away. By following the injunctions of Allah they are protected from this tendency. With her body and clothes hidden under her outer-garment nobody can tell about her personal taste, occupation, age or characteristics and make unfair prejudgements based on this.

This enables a woman to buy and sell, travel on public transport, consult with teachers and other professionals and interact with officialdom and authorities, earn a living and study, go on visits and outdoor activities. There is no ambiguity for men outside when they see her. She is forbidden to them and so there is a certain respect and deference engendered by her looks and attitude. The *hijab* defines a woman's role and what she is expecting of men in public places. She expects them to walk past her in the street. In dealings with traders the transaction will be short and business-like. The *hijab* does not invite intimacy. It holds non-*mahram* men at a comfortable distance for them and for her. It reminds men of their own wives when they are out in the public sphere and that other women are covered for them. For unmarried men, they see the public face of the women available for marriage and through due process with protection for both, they go through a series of gateways which lead to finding their spouse and getting to know the person within the safe boundaries of their private

home. The value of a woman's life and honor is increased dramatically when possible suitors have to make more effort to reach her. It is a far cry from the accessibility of women who are left to search for partners in the uncertain environment of the pub or night-club

It can also be said that women define themselves very much with reference to other people's impressions of them. More than men they need to have their qualities affirmed from outside. A man who is a bore may ramble on regardless even though his audience have long since dropped off whereas a woman is much more likely to have noticed the impression she is giving earlier on. This pressure from outside to fit in, to conform to certain standards is kept in check by her inner convictions. Thrown into a new situation, surrounded by strangers pulling this way and that, it becomes more difficult to hold onto these core values. This is especially true of young women who are more easily dazzled by what is novel and interesting outside. Once back in the familiar environment they return to their senses. The Islamic dress helps keep the inner self intact with the outer coverings. It reduces the pressure on the Muslim woman to do what everyone else is doing. It enables her to pay attention to what is happening around her and check it against her own standards because she does not have to worry about her inner self being exposed to the scrutiny of others. This is advantageous for the role of women as guardians of the values and traditions of their communities. A woman in *hijab* is continually reminded that all that the outside world has to offer is not her main priority. She cannot be easily led off the track of her own responsibilities towards self, family and community. The distractions of the outside world and other people's demands may well make a woman put her own interests as a lower priority if she does not have this protection which keeps strangers at a safe distance.

Hijab helps women recognize boundaries. The boundary may be between private and public space. It may be the boundary between what concerns her and what does not. The boundary can also be between her own duties and the responsibilities of others. This moving between limits maximizes her effectiveness as a servant of her Creator. She does not waste energy doing something that will not benefit her or her family and community. She is less likely to take on a burden or responsibility she cannot bear but rather leave it to someone who is in a better position to fulfill this responsibility.

In Islamic life, all believers are part of a team pulling in the same direction each with their own speciality and role. Rather, like a football squad, all have their positions. The defence do not run all over the pitch trying to score but are most effective for the whole team when they hold their positions.

Without these boundaries, women may be inclined to invade the territory of men or other women interfering in that which does not concern them or shouldering the responsibility that someone else should bear. Coming outside their sphere of influence and effectiveness, they may block male energy instead of enhancing it for the good of all.

One of the ways in which Islamic dress helps women to develop their character is to protect them from having to fit their behavior to the approval of the strangers around them. Whilst non-Muslim dress is designed to appeal to all the varying tastes of the people around, the Muslim women only has to be concerned with what her husband thinks of her hairstyle as he is the one she lives with. It does not matter what the local shopkeepers think. Neither does she have to change her face or opinions to appeal to the different people around her. She is not compelled to tailor herself to an audience. Instead, her

dress engenders a stable and confident continuity of speech and action, which prevents the women being swept along on a tide of new fashions and trends.

It is amazing to note how quickly fashion trends can sweep a society as each individual woman succumbs. Consider how in about twenty years decency in dress standards was compromised in the UK from the forties to the sixties. About fifty years earlier long skirts for women in public were almost universal. It was almost unheard of for men and women of all classes to go out without a hat or head cover of some kind. Public decency demanded that people put on their outdoor clothes to go out. It was only after the sixties that it would be acceptable to go out without a coat or jacket of some kind. Women of the older generation still go out in their over-coat or 'mac' in the height of summer, a vestige of a time when dress standards for the Europeans was closer to what is required of Muslims. A look at any Victorian or Edwardian drama on television will show us that women were covered from head to toe often with gloves, certainly with high-necked blouses. They dressed in layers and what many in Victorian times have been thought of as a petticoat worn as underwear would serve as an evening dress for today's western woman.

Improperly dressed or half-dressed a person becomes like a straw in the wind propelled along by other people's wishes and decisions. The Islamic way of dressing reminiscent of the mode of dress of days gone by is something of an art. At each stage the clothes are layered on in the name of Allah. The mind is brought to attention of the purpose for going out. Everything is done in a deliberate way and with a strong will. This is the *hijab* as armor. If the home is a place of sanctuary and peace, then going out is more like a battle.

Paradoxically, if one's body, hair and decorative clothing are on display it makes a person more inhibited in the sense of fearing to express what they really think. Women who dress to attract may well lose their physical inhibitions so that they become tactile with strangers and invade the body space of strange men but at the same time, they tailor their behavior to suit the stranger. Modesty is part of the human condition, which needs to be enhanced by clothes. Without it our distinctiveness as human beings becomes eroded by the regard of others.

This awareness of playing to an audience can interfere with the purity of intention which is such a crucial aspect of Islamic faith. Muslims are required to direct all their actions to please their Creator and not human beings. Being showy about one's appearance leads to showing off one's actions and seeking the approval of other people instead of the pleasure of the Creator. This may make a person hesitate to do something that they know is good or perhaps do something wrong in order to gain someone's approval.

At the centre of most of the discourse on *hijab* is the perspective of men vis-a-vis women. But what is the effect women have on other women by the way they present themselves in public? A poster of a model with a perfect figure in her underwear may make a man dissatisfied with his own wife. For women, the effect may be just as demoralizing. A standard has been placed which she will never reach and this makes her dissatisfied with herself. The results may be panic dieting or complacency that leads to a woman giving up and getting totally out of shape. It might make her try to imitate the role models in dress that is quite inappropriate for her lifestyle.

The Islamic over-garment keeps the hidden charms under wraps so that women do not compare and compete with each other. Envy

amongst women is halted. The poor do not see the fine clothes of the rich and the woman who can only afford plain, basic clothes is not tormented by the sight of others in all their finery. The prospect of women gaining unfair advantage in public life because of their fine clothes and good looks is reduced as the *hijab* places women on a more equal level.

Thus, Islamic dress helps to control vanity. The dictionary definition of the verb '*hajaba*' includes to veil, cover, screen, shelter, seclude, hide, obscure from sight. Thus, *hijab* cuts women off from the fuel of vanity which is to be noticed by others. They are shaded from the gaze of men so that they can blend into the world outside and go about their business undisturbed without strangers either wanting a piece of them or wanting them to do things their way. The Muslim woman is also protected from envy and from thinking she is better than everyone else which in the Islamic understanding is the beginning of downfall. This is the *hijab* as camouflage in a world of flux.

Chapter Four

The Debate

There is no denying that there are many debates amongst the Muslims. Islam has a vast bank of knowledge and Allah (Exalted and Glorified be He) has allowed for the 'din' (or Islamic way of life) to encompass all the different people of the globe through all the different periods of history. It is not only inevitable but also desirable that debates should arise. In the question of debates, however, there is an etiquette of differing in the Islamic code of practice. It prevents unpleasant argumentation and checks anger. This means that there is respect for those one disagrees with and acknowledgement of their right to hold differing views as long they have backing in the Islamic sources. Muslims do not have a right to question the integrity of another's faith simply because they hold a differing view. The arbiter is the revelation of Allah which is also called the Criterion, the Qur'an, the practice of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and then that of his companions (may Allah be pleased with them) and the following generation who were closest to the sources of pure revealed knowledge. Of course each individual Muslim today is not required to derive the whole body of rulings themselves. Nor is it desirable for the Muslims to have do-it-yourself *faqihs* proliferating but at the same time, Islam is not a religion in which the scriptures are the preserve of the scholarly elite. The beauty of Islam is that all believers have direct

access to the revelation but they are required to approach it with a great deal of humility and to defer to the opinion of more learned people and recognized *faqihs* who see issues in a much wider context than the average Muslim.

It is an Islamic principle that when one is advising, one should tend to make things easier for other people even if one prefers to take the more strict opinion for oneself. The Prophet (peace be upon him) forbade us from making religion difficult for people. If a Muslim likes to do a supererogatory deed for his own soul that is commendable but it becomes wrong if he then tries to impose it on others as something obligatory. People vary in their capacity for discipline and application of Muslim practice. It is also wrong to berate other Muslims if they do not follow your example. A Muslim teaches by example and this is the most effective way of encouraging others to change their behavior. If anyone likes an example they will follow willingly. An attitude of humility and lack of boastfulness works like a magnet. If a believer has a tendency to praise herself or say 'why cannot you be more like me?' it tends to repel people.

For the issue of face covering for example, women who are content with the proof and rationale of this decision can do it but are not in any position to frown on women who follow another accredited opinion. Neither can women who cover their hair and leave the face open feel that *niqab* wearers are doing something to be sneered at. They can take the evidence on board and act accordingly whilst respecting the other opinion. In the same way, men would be very unwise to try to force women to wear *niqab* or alternatively to force them to take it off if they prefer it. Persuasion one way or another always backed up by clear evidence makes for greater harmony in choice. Such choices should not come between a couple. In most

cases, it is seen that like-minded people usually gravitate towards each other and the conflict does not arise.

It is not only Muslims who set up rifts between themselves and take up positions on opposite sides of a debate. Enmity between Muslims can be stirred up from outside. Anyone who has an interest in undermining the harmony of Muslims will look for weak points and try to stir up arguments. Even Muslims with good intentions can end up causing harm by their attitude to others holding a different opinion.

The various positions

The *hijab/no-hijab - hijab/niqab* debate has been a flash-point for quarrels between Muslims in recent years and between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is easy to see why. It is very symbolic. It is a symbol of practice and non-practice of Islam, of gender relations, of political power and so many other factors that will become clearer as we explore the issue. Whatever we may wish it is sometimes seen as a threat, a red rag to a bull.

I will state the varying sides of the debate and by way of illustration quote from a sample of letters, which appeared in the popular Muslim news-magazine, 'Q News'. The views expressed in the letters page are quite representative of the varying views prevalent in Britain today.

i) *Hijab*: a must for Muslim women.

On one side of the debate are women and men who believe that the believing Muslim woman who practises Islam should wear a head-scarf in front of non-*mahram* men and that she should be reserved in her behavior towards them and not mix with them unnecessarily.

ii) *Hijab* is not necessary for Muslim women or at least should not be given too much emphasis.

Some Muslims think that because lots of Muslim women living in Britain do not wear head-scarves, that they are not necessary. They do not believe that the evidence is strong enough in the Qur'an and Sunnah to compel women to wear it. They think that women who wear it are creating unnecessary barriers to the world of work, for example and are giving Muslims a backward image. They associate head-scarves with uneducated women and think they stop women getting further in education and into a position where they can influence British society. They have also seen a degree of hypocrisy amongst *hijab* wearers and extend this to state 'just wearing *hijab* does not mean you're a good Muslim.'

iii) *Niqab* is necessary for Muslim women.

A sub-branch of the debate comes from the advocates of the face-cover who believe that women are not fully practising their Islam unless they cover their faces and segregate themselves from men as much as possible.

iv) *Niqab* is not necessary for Muslim women.

Other Muslims do not agree that *niqab* is a must. They think it is a minority opinion. In this camp Muslims range from those who admire *niqab* wearers but would not like to emulate them, those who tolerate their practice but feel they are wrong and those who think *niqab* wearers are misguided and giving Islam a bad image and spoiling it for everyone else. Finally there are some who aspire to follow their example but do not feel able in their present context.

v) *Hijab* is bad for women.

In this camp are Muslims who think *hijab* is wholly negative. They think that Muslim women who understand that *hijab* (usually meaning the head-scarf) is compulsory are wrong. They say that modesty can be expressed in many ways according to the norms of the society in question. These Muslims think that wearing of *hijab* militates against the success of *da`wah* (calling to Islam) and makes Muslims look uneducated and backward as stated in the second group. They do not tolerate women wearing it and are actively hostile rather than tolerant.

Amongst non-Muslims are those who think *hijab* is an unacceptable challenge to the norms of modern British 'secular' society and an affront. They do not like a woman's decision not to participate in the general trend of displaying one's sexuality in the public domain. They resent the wish of those women to hold back their private selves and resent their brazen display of religiosity in a society where religion has been relegated to the back seat. They feel the very presence of such women in society spoils that society's image on the world stage and hinders progress in technology and consumerism.

Most Muslims are in the first two camps and are either committed to *hijab* or at least tolerant of another's right to wear it. However the debate is guaranteed to raise a lot of interest in both men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims precisely because as we will see, this is not just about a piece of cloth but about the challenge that practice of Islam is posing in a secularized world.

A discussion in print

The following letters debate in 'Q News' went on for so long that letters were entitled '*hijab* again' as if we were becoming weary of the debate. It is true that some Muslims feel we should have moved on from the *hijab* issue. Women constitute more than half the population, say those impatient with this fuss about dress. They have a role. Let them wear their *hijabs* and get on with the job or at least let them tolerate others wearing or not wearing it as the case may be. Yet it is an indication of the significance of this issue for so many people that it did go on for so long.

In stating that *hijab* is bad for women brother Farid from Essex states, 'I would like to congratulate `Umar Tomkinson' on a truly excellent letter. I agree with his views entirely that the *hijab* is not part of true Islam. I regard the *hijab* as a perversion of Islam and accordingly I condemn anyone who wears it.' Quoting from one of the explanations of a well-known translator of the Qur'an, Muhammad Asad he states that *hijab* was only a cultural accoutrement of the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He balanced this with his equal condemnation of semi-nakedness of European women in the summer and had got into trouble for criticizing a women's see-through dress at work but he had been vindicated by the Daily Mail who backed him up.

He goes on, 'We Muslims are trying to bring non-Muslims to Islam but associating the *hijab* with Islam will drive them away altogether. Only those converts who are brainwashed seem to wear the *hijab*. If Muslim women want to protest against western decadence they can take up the Mary Whitehouse example and begin for instance by going to newsagents (largely owned by Asians now) and persuade them to remove the vast stocks of pornography that line the top

shelves.' Further, he threatens, 'I have told British Telecom and the Body Shop not to allow women to wear *hijab* on the grounds that these women should not be following a corruption of our great religion.'

Needless to say Farid's letter put the cat amongst the pigeons and women and men wrote in quite upset at such hostility to *hijab* rather than mere disagreement with it and particularly hurtful coming from a fellow Muslim.

In answer to him, Brother Sahib of the Islamic Party of Britain conceded that Muslims should be prepared to assess how far the Qur'anic verse, an-Nur 31, can be applied in the contemporary context but goes on that, 'to deny the existence of the verse is downright dishonest.' Brother Sahib takes issue with brother Farid for arguing against *hijab*. 'What is worse, he then tries to argue that wearing *hijab* is in fact against Islam without being able to support his argument with a single verse of the Qur'an nor even the most obscure *hadith*.' Sahib goes on to say that far from Muslim men controlling women by making them wear the scarf, it is in fact people like Farid who is trying to dictate to women and to impose his own 'far-fetched philosophy of sexual relations in true male chauvinistic fashion.'

In the same issue a correspondent, Br Ahmed Dabbagh finds himself in support of the view that women are not obliged to wear *hijab*. He puts the onus on men to resist their attraction to women rather than on women to hide it. 'Do not you think the obligation should lie on the men to respect women and harness their desires even if the woman is attractive? If they cannot do this, men do not deserve the degree they have been given over women in the first place.' He urges Muslim men to treat women as partners rather than sex objects.

It is significant to note the degree of strong emotion that comes through in these letters and the strong language used especially by those going against the grain, as it were, in arguing against *hijab* in the forum of a Muslim magazine. This is a reflection of the significance of *hijab* seen by its wearers as a badge of honor and by others as an affront and to some men as a reassurance, to others a threat.

In response to brother Dabbagh correspondents seem to want to downplay this emergence once again of so much weight being given to 'women's clothing'. Shagufta Yaqub who later became editor of the magazine states that she 'fully agrees with Mr Dabbagh for turning the attention away from the much debated issue of women's clothing for once and actually emphasizing the duty of Muslim men to lower their gaze.' However, she goes on to assure Mr Dabbagh that 'many women are wearing *hijab* out of choice.' She points out that the onus is on Muslim women even more to adopt the *hijab* now that we have seen the terrible consequences of liberated sexual expression. She argues that unveiling for men is as much giving in to male oppression and domination as veiling ourselves at their command. She urges Mr Dabbagh to 'spare us *hijabi* sisters your pity and shower it on those free and liberated women who have become victims of their own liberation.'

A well-known Muslim writer, Ruqayyah Maqsood adds her voice to the debate when she argues that the preoccupation with *hijab* is diverting us from 'things that really matter if we are going to make Islam our complete way of life: things like courage, compassion, tolerance, honesty, generosity etc. 'Sister Ruqayyah is impatient with this over-emphasis on dress and the prescriptive tendency which leads to what she calls 'a kind of school uniform for women'. Her research into the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the era just

before the advent of Islam sheds light on the Qur'anic verse which asks women to draw their veils over their breasts. She described how women in the pre-Islamic period used to wear 'head-veils usually hanging down the back in a decorative manner held on with an '*agal*' showing most of the hair'. She goes on to explain that, 'they were asked to draw this veil across their bosoms and if the veil was transparent (as it usually was) to make it out of thicker material'. It was the custom in those days for women to have their breasts uncovered hence women are told to 'draw their head-veils over their bosoms.' Ruqayyah says the minimum request, 'is to cover the entire body from the neck down, as is the normal female practice.' She says that colors and styles are a matter of taste. Whilst avoiding ostentation and flaunting one's wealth before other women, 'when one is mixing with women of modest means, Muslim women are not required to make themselves look dowdy or ugly, only modest.'

Ms Khola Hasan weighs in with her letter condemning this 'ludicrous debate about the validity of *hijab*.' She calls it ludicrous because in her opinion it is like questioning the validity of the prayers or the pilgrimage. With overwhelming evidence for the *hijab* contained in the Qur'an and Sunnah she maintains that the question of whether or not *hijab* is mandatory is not up for debate. She does not think Muslims like Ruqayyah should fuel the debate further. However, the late Dr ad-Darsh (may Allah have mercy on him) who was a respected *faqih* in Britain at that time does join in the debate in the same issue to hope that his authoritative voice would put an end to what he calls this 'soap opera of letters' regarding *hijab*. He warns that the tenor of the debate is undermining Muslim unity. He urges readers to search out the truth from authoritative sources which are 'clearly laid down, not in personal opinions, but in the three accepted sources

of Islamic jurisprudence: the Qur'an, the *hadiths* and the writings of the '*ulama*' (or scholars)'. He feels it is damaging to give vent to counter productive letters attacking each other's opinions.

A young correspondent, Sonia in the same issue bears out the damage that can be done to morale by criticism of *hijab*. 'Mr Farid ad-Diwani totally misinterpreted the Qur'an and upset a lot of sisters as well as myself.' Sonia says that by casting doubt on *hijab* as a Muslim man 'you are giving Satan a chance to put doubts into people's minds.' She is frustrated with the opposition to *hijab* coming from Muslims themselves, especially when it can be such a big step to put it on in a society like Britain. She asks, 'Why the big issue? Allah told us to wear *hijab* so wear it. I am sick of people trying to find something wrong with *hijab*.' She goes on that, 'by disobeying Allah you are making it harder for many people who believe you and for yourself.' In answer to Farid's contention that the Qur'an leaves a lot to our own sense of decency, she replies that people have different levels of what they consider decent. For some a mini skirt would be considered decent.

The debate ricochets back when a correspondent from Essex 'name supplied' comes back to the point that 'in today's over zealous climate, the badge of loyalty to Islam appears, for some, to be a piece of cloth covering the hair. This is put above kind-heartedness, mercy, spirituality and other virtues.' The writer fears that, 'we will do damage to our beloved faith' when he writes, 'a famous writer once wrote of Catholicism. The church knows all the rules but it does not know what goes on in a single human heart.'

This is a common refrain for those who claim that questions of women's dress loom too large in the Islamic discourse. They say that after all it is 'just a piece of cloth' but as this one debate is illustrating,

one of many that goes on all the time in study circles, Internet debates, in conferences and amongst scholars, this *hijab* issue is not going away.

A male correspondent `Umar Tomkinson responded to what he calls 'the paper's rigid stance you adopt against BT's dress code for not including the *hijab* as part of the Muslim dress.' He goes on; 'Having researched this area quite thoroughly, I fail to find anywhere in the Qur'an (anything) which obligates women to wear a scarf, let alone the hideous veil which has become fashionable since the Iranian revolution.' Later in the letter he observes, 'in the West that we know, the scarf has been an accepted item of clothing and these days is readily identified with Islamic extremism and backwardness.' As is often the case in such rationales the writer separates modesty within and purity of heart from its visible or tangible aspect saying that no clothing can substitute modesty as a state of mind.

In another very different letter, another male correspondent, Salim Ahmed reprimands one of Q's writers, Yasmine Choudhry for 'her inaccurate and misleading statements' about *hijab*. He goes on to outline the requirements of *hijab* according to well-known mainstream opinion and says 'any woman who persists in wearing less than that which is required after having been told is sinning. Her father, brothers and husband should also take on some of this sin for not making her do her duty.' He later reprimands 'one or two prominent Muslim women working for Islam' for their 'inadequate *hijab*'. He feels that they are setting a bad example.

Views such as these raise strong emotions in anyone who cares about Islam. The women who wear *hijab* or *niqab* will be especially hurt to have it called 'a hideous veil' by a fellow Muslim. Consequently, they may either modify their dress against their inner

conviction or else fear to go out because of the impression they are giving.

Women on the other hand who have been working hard for Islam and have bothered to wear any kind of *hijab* with a struggle will be pretty deflated to hear that they are wearing 'inadequate' *hijab* and are setting a bad example. It may discourage them from their work. It may make them modify their dress out of line with their inner conviction and thus done with resentment or it might make them rebellious and start to deliberately go out to antagonize their more conservative brothers thus causing rifts in the community.

By way of example, one conference illustrates how *hijab* can dominate. A female scholar from Egypt, Dr Hiba Ra'uf was invited to address a large Islamic conference in England consisting mainly of young people. After her lecture she offered a private session of about two hours for the women to go over some of their concerns and allow them to take advantage of her expertise. Although this woman was knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects and could have shed light on many issues, nearly all the questions directed to her were about the standard of women's dress. As the audience were mainly young women, it was not enough for them that she offer general answers and principles from which specific rulings could be inferred. Instead she was required almost to give a personal 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' to the individual dress choice of dozens of sisters who queued up for her verdict. 'Sister. Is this OK?' another questioner would ask of her jeans and loose top. Almost like a fashion designer she would have to say, 'No, sister, you need looser trousers and a much longer top,' hoping that this would answer the questions of the rest. However each sister wanted her own personal assessment.

There was some basic insecurity among these young women about their dress choices. They were struggling between their desire to express their commitment to Islam but also be able to do this according to their own individual style and with an accurate reflection of their position in society. If these girls, many from Pakistani families brought up in Britain, were to adopt the *jilbab* and Egyptian style long head and chest piece, which would probably have been ideal in terms of the requirements of *hijab*, how then were they to reflect their taste, their own culture, the adaptations of their family culture? At the root of these debates and this agonizing over *hijab*, it is not 'a piece of cloth' that is being debated but the women's very identity.

Chapter Five

Public Struggles

As well as reflecting the debate around *hijab* amongst Muslims themselves, 'Q News' highlighted some of the workplace disputes encountered by Muslim women and some of the barriers to be overcome in public life.

a) Amna: Shop worker

Q News followed the case of Amna Mahmud who claimed she had been laid off from her job with The Body Shop after she began to wear *hijab*. According to 'Q News', 'she was told she was surplus to requirements just one week after wearing the head-dress to the store in Hounslow, Middlesex where she had worked for over a year'. She had up to then a spotless employment record. Her relationship with management 'deteriorated after she decided to take up the *hijab* as an expression of Islamic modesty'. Although The Body Shop has no policy on head-scarves Ms Mahmud said she felt the atmosphere change when colleagues saw her new attire. 'When I walked into the staff-room, I felt ignored and to some extent disrespected', she said. She had a discussion later in the day about why as a Muslim she should be wearing the scarf. Later in the week, she was told that Saturday staff reductions were in order and that she would have to be

relieved of her duties. At the time, The Body Shop was recruiting more part-time workers for the Christmas period. Ms Mahmud was also the longer serving and more experienced of two Saturday staff employed at the branch.

The sticking point for people like Ms Mahmud in bringing her case against this branch which was a franchise of The Body Shop group, was that she would have to take her case to the CRE (Commission for Racial Equality) who did not then have a policy on religious discrimination. As a Briton from a Pakistani family, she would have been covered against racial discrimination. However, the wearing of Islamic dress is not a matter of race but of religious practice and such practices were not covered under legislation. This whole issue was taken up by the Runnymede Trust on Islamophobia, which was set up to look into and make recommendations about discrimination against Muslims. Muslims wanted to know where the dividing line lay between race and religion and how Muslims of all races could be assured of protection for practice on purely religious grounds. They were interested in cases of protection for Sikhs' right to wear turbans, which could be seen to be similar to the right of Muslim women not to suffer unfair discrimination for the wearing of *hijab*.

I wanted to know at a deeper level from this story about what the perceived threat was from Amna according to her employer's point of view. They realized that she had chosen to assert her Islamic identity in this visible way. While legislation protects and pushes forward practices in favour of Muslim women who wear *hijab*, attitudes of the heart lag behind. We know this from cases where rights for people based on racial laws have advanced their position or protected them from discrimination whilst their opponents have not been convinced and have harbored resentment in their hearts.

It is significant that this case occurred with a company like The Body Shop which was represented by the Hounslow franchise. The company is well known for its ethical stance on all manner of environmental, social and consumer issues and its founder has been known as a human dynamo of ethical activity. Then why was it not appropriate to have someone like Amna covered in a white head-scarf to serve their customers? Did she act as some kind of antidote to the glamor of cosmetics by refusing to add her own hair as an advert for the firm? Would she put customers off? Do women hesitate to buy cosmetics from women who do not look the part? Yet the company used to run campaigns urging women to militate against the tyranny of body image. Maybe one should take the Hounslow management's excuse at face value, that Miss Mahmud was the 'unfortunate but unavoidable victim of staff cutbacks' but the timing is very questionable. The outcome as reported in 'Q News' was that Miss Mahmud won an out of court settlement from the franchise 'Sitestone Ltd' in which they 'agreed to pay Miss Mahmud an undisclosed sum and amend its appearance policy to state that religious clothing such as *hijab*, *kippas* and *turbans* were allowed.' A Body Shop spokeswoman stated 'although we specify very clearly to our franchises what we would like to encourage, whether they take it up is a matter for them' which outlines some of the difficulties large companies have in requiring their franchisees to uphold their policies. As ever with such cases, regardless of stated company policy, the foibles and prejudices of individuals will play the most crucial part in the employment prospects for any individual whether they be hampered by race, class, appearance or disability. This relies on an employee having the tenacity to question the prevailing situation and as we have seen, by the grace of Allah, it becomes more difficult for companies who would like to discriminate against *muhajjabat*. The most favourable

outcome is when the heart follows the law, where employers, co-workers and customers gradually get used to having us around in the work place and begin to take it for granted that more and more they will see Islamically dressed Muslim women side by side with their colleagues. The blessings of having covered women amongst them are bound to reverberate around the company.

When I wrote to The Body Shop about the case, as ever in such matters, unfortunately they are 'unable to comment on the specific report' but refer me to their equal opportunities statement pointing out that it is given in the form of guidelines to franchises in the hope they will follow them. The only discriminatory trait they allow is ability. The statement says, 'in the UK and in a number of other countries particularly in the Middle East, The Body Shop employs both men and women who define themselves as Muslim and Muslim women staff members regularly wear traditional Muslim dress.'

It is interesting to note that *hijab* is often called 'traditional' Muslim dress as if it is something that Muslims get over when they get westernized or modernized. By many amongst the ranks of the committed *muhajjaba*, a head-cover is seen as every bit as modern as big hair.

One of the questions that come out of the Amna Mahmud case is the suspicion that her dress was seen as dowdy and unattractive and this is one of the themes I wanted to explore in my survey. Is it the case that the wider public looks on Muslim women in *hijab* as dowdy, dull and unattractive? Is this one of the factors that makes believing women hesitate to wear it? No one would mind being seen as plain in their public stance but dowdy? This is a value judgement on ourselves as women.

b) Farida: Car manufacturer

Another case highlighted in 'Q News' was that of Farida Khanum who worked for IBC, an engineering firm manufacturing Vauxhall cars. She began to wear *hijab* after performing the '*umrah*' (minor pilgrimage to Mecca). Like Miss Mahmud she had an 'exemplary record' at her workplace until that time and had received commendations and promotion. On making her entrance in *hijab*, she was removed from the shop floor by her foreman who claimed 'it was for her own safety until the Health and Safety Department has assessed the danger of wearing a head-scarf on the production line.' Khanum was told the *hijab* could impair her vision and that it could get caught in machinery. Incidentally, Sikhs in turbans were allowed to use the same machinery. Then for the first time bosses began to question Miss Khanum's work. Worse, she received verbal abuse and intrusive questions. Her immediate foreman demanded an explanation for why she was 'wearing the chador'. She found the foreman's intrusive questions humiliating. She was then suspended and sacked for gross misconduct. The reason given was that she had taken time off without permission a month before to attend a university open day. Miss Khanum insisted that she had got permission.

The tribunal ruled that Miss Khanum had been unfairly dismissed and discriminated against under the race and sex discrimination act. Attention was drawn in the ruling to the pejorative remarks by fellow workers towards Miss Khanum's scarf. They called her 'Yasser Arafat' and asked if she was wearing 'a new hard hat'. Miss Khanum's lawyer said that the case showed that all complaints about her work were directly connected to her decision to wear *hijab* and called for legislation to be brought that would outlaw religious discrimination. 'Q News' reported Miss Khanum's hope that the decision would make

IBC mend its ways. 'They did not leave me much choice. The worst thing to do in the face of bullying is to give in', she said.

As in other cases where people have challenged discrimination, Miss Khanum's case may have made life easier for other *muhajjabat* in the work place but again personal attitudes are slow to change.

If we analyze the underlying attitudes in this case, we observe that Miss Khanum before *hijab* was one of the gang, a respected and valued member of the workforce. When she changed her dress and asserted her Islamic identity, she became an outsider, a threat and no longer one of the gang. The Qur'anic statement that the Jews and the Christians will never be pleased with Muslims until they follow their ways is borne out by incidents like these. As long as Muslims suppress their Islamic identity and go along with the rules, all is calm but when they assert Islam, the smiling faces turn sour and the charm switches off.

One of the unwritten rules of the British workplace is that easy flirtation between men and women should be tolerated and facilitated. It is the only way they know of establishing a happy working relationship and the only way men seem to have found to allow women into their work-space. You have to take the teasing and play along to be accepted. When a woman wears Islamic dress, which deliberately puts men at a distance and closes off the private self, it is as if she has betrayed her work-mates. In the case of a woman like Miss Khanum who came from a Bangladeshi family, her relationship towards her employers would be harmonious were she to assert her identity as an Asian because this is not a challenge or a threat to the established order. It seemed there was a large section of the work-force from families with roots in the sub-continent. However if one were asserting an Islamic identity, that is altogether different. It conjures up vague notions of menace and threat carefully cultivated

over time by the media and a challenge to the equilibrium of British society and all it stands for. This is why women in *hijab* are difficult to tolerate and why many women cannot handle the change in attitude and hostility that ensues. Who wants to lose their position in their company, the respect and camaraderie of their colleagues for 'a piece of cloth?' Well thanks to Allah the strength of some women's commitment to the cloth outweighs any allegiance to a work-place that rejects them for their choice of belief. As a result of the stand taken by sisters like Amna and Farida, maybe it is the workplace that will have to change.

c) Store policy

I contacted a few large department stores in the UK to have an idea of their stated policy on *hijab*. Overall the responses 'on paper' were quite gratifying. It is important to have that assurance on paper of what they may aspire to even though in practice there is no doubt that human attitudes will get the message across absolutely effectively. A snigger from a group of colleagues when a *muhajjaba* walks into the canteen, a customer's preference to be served by the one without the head-scarf, hints from the management or invitations to boozy staff parties will all put the pressure on. At the same time, it is important to have the stated policy so that the *muhajjaba* can ride the storm and make it easier for women coming up in the future to wear *hijab* in the work-place. Of course, for every snide comment, you may have a dozen positive ones and many of my survey correspondents reported situations where they were treated with more respect, courtesy and interest. While *hijab* is seen by some as a threat it is seen by others as something quite mysterious and interesting, another world of someone else's experience to explore and of course to many it is a matter of complete indifference.

John Lewis policy on recruitment is that 'no account shall be taken of a candidate's age, sex, marital status, race, social position, family connections or religious and political views except in so far as these circumstances are deemed likely to affect efficiency.' From this statement, it would appear that if they wanted to challenge *hijab*, then it would be the second part of the sentence, which would be significant, but at least it is put on a level playing field with other factors that could put someone at a disadvantage. Many people looking for work complain that social position and even postcode can be one of the biggest barriers to getting a job.

This is why *muhajjabat* must not forget that their color, education, class and family connections and gender can all sometimes put them at an advantage over people with factors that can form disadvantages to getting employment such as having the wrong accent or some facial disfigurement.

I was interested in how far the company allowed 'front of house' jobs to go to *muhajjabat*, thus allowing women in head-scarves to be in the public eye and to be seen to be representing the company, not locked away at a desk job or call centre. John Lewis' representative stated, "We have recruited Muslim women who wear a head-dress 'front of house' although we require the material of the head-dress to comply with the company's business dress standards. We have not experienced any difficulty with this to my knowledge."

Woolworth's personnel department stated in answer to my query that, yes, they would be willing to recruit a woman wearing a Muslim head-scarf for a 'front of house' post. In one of their London branches they had employed *muhajjabat* and had even provided scarves and to her knowledge had not encountered difficulties.

The Edinburgh branch of Debenhams stated also that they would be willing to employ a *muhajjaba* in a front of house position but at that time had not had any applicants.

The Edinburgh branch of Mothercare answered my question as to whether they would be willing to employ a Muslim woman 'front of house' wearing a head-scarf with a 'no'. When I phoned for clarification, they said they had no objection to Muslim women employees but an objection to the scarf. When I asked why they gave me the classic answer. You've guessed it. 'Moving machinery'. I was puzzled but then realized it was because they use conveyer belts. Also the head-scarf is not part of the uniform. They have however employed a *muhajjaba* as a cleaner and have experienced no problems. No moving machinery there then.

This was a small sample of well-known stores. Unfortunately, I did not get replies from all the employers I questioned but from this sample we can see that security of employment rights for *muhajjabat* are still fairly patchy and there are plenty of barriers to women being employed in *hijab*. The onus is probably on us to design ways of wearing *hijab* which look appropriate and yet blend well with store uniforms if we want to promote the employment of *muhajjabat* women in jobs which we could say are very suitable for them. Working in women's clothing retail or children's and baby-wear is a very good environment for Muslim women being a predominantly female environment. It is not good enough to wrap a piece of poorly sewn fabric around our heads in a careless way. Should not our dress designers get together and design for us really fetching ways to look good and decent in public and above all to keep our scarves out of that all-important moving machinery.

d) Out and about in *niqab*

Women who wear *niqab* have a further barrier to being accepted in public places and having their right to work or education unhindered by their choice of dress. Sometimes they are at a double disadvantage in that they do not get the full support of the wider Muslim community for what they wear.

'Q News' reported the story of Naima, a woman who wears *jilbab* and *niqab* in which they described some of her daily trials. In describing her wearing of these clothes the report said, 'her choice of dress is less a matter of fashion than an item of faith-a human *kiswa*, at once concealing and adorning her attractiveness. The chador is both a mark of her identity and a social statement.' One of the most alarming incidents was when she was thrown off a moving bus by the conductor. Her daughter lost her footing while trying to stay with her mother causing her considerable injuries. She has been called 'Ninja' in the street and threatened with violence.

Naima has noticed the difference in attitude to her status from before she began to wear chador. She explains 'people would stop to have a chat and would often compliment my baby daughter.' Now at best she is ignored but very often receives cold stares or verbal abuse. What Naima was calling for was a change in the law that would recognize Islamophobia and would protect her right to hold and practice her beliefs. She would like protection from verbal abuse, threats and violent incidents like the one she suffered to the extent that she can make complaints and press charges. Such laws could also have protected the employment rights of the two women whose cases we have looked at.

In this case, we can again gain insight into the attitudes underlying Naima's plight from the difference in attitude before she began to wear chador and *niqab*. Before people would readily approach her in the street and exchange niceties about her baby. Why did she suddenly then turn into a hate figure? It seems that her all-enveloping look is designed to shut out and so people react with hostility. In reacting to her story, even fellow Muslim correspondents do not give her much back up. Roshan Drabu argues in her letter to the news-magazine that Naima, by following the opinion of wearing chador and face cover is drawing unnecessary attention to herself. She asks, "You state that Naima Radouae turns heads wherever she goes. Where is the modesty in that?" She goes on, "if she was at all interested in being modest, she would wear normal loose fitting western clothes." The writer states that this mode of dress is not specified in the Qur'an and asks how women can live normal lives like this. She believes it sets a bad example for Islam. It is not possible to say from her letter if Roshan approves of an ordinary head-scarf with face uncovered and just disapproves of the face-cover or whether she feels Muslim women can dispense with a head-cover altogether. A correspondent, brother Habari backs Roshan up by stating 'the aim is not to cause unnecessary attention' and contends that the covered face could be alarming, especially for children. Like Roshan he argues that by wearing these kind of clothes they are portraying Islam as something primitive. They both use this word in their letters thus reflecting the views of the wider society that by dressing like this, women are stepping back in time and becoming primitive. For them moving on and progress is somehow tied up with uncovering more despite the fact that from our current knowledge of 'primitive' societies we see that they went about with fewer clothes or none at all in some modern primitive cultures. Again, it is not clear from his statements whether

this correspondent objects to the *niqab* only or Islamic head-scarves in general.

There is no doubt that the full face-cover brings with it a stronger reaction and it is no doubt culturally very strange in the context of western society. Covered faces are tied up in people's minds with menace. It is the way hijackers or burglars are portrayed. People feel threatened that someone does not want to be recognized and go about their business showing emotion to women friends or expressing daily courtesies in transactions in shops and such like.

Aspects of *fiqh* which recommend face covering also go hand in hand with other recommendations which would curtail women from going to mixed educational establishments or work-places or from riding on mixed public transport. This is why women in Saudi Arabia and Iran have ease of movement, as the society is adapted for the more segregated life. The tensions seem to occur when a woman dressed in *niqab* tries to go about her business in the mixed environment of British society. Riding in a car with a *mahram*, going to an all female work or study place and refraining from eating and browsing in public would all alleviate some of the tensions for the woman who is committed to *niqab*.

In my questionnaire, I wanted to sort out some of the feelings between sisters who wear head-scarf only and the advocates of *niqab*. At some level *muhajjabat* seem to feel that *niqab* wearers are making life unnecessarily difficult for themselves and by inviting more abuse, by extension making life that bit harder in this country for those they regard as wearing a more reasonable and practical form of Islamic dress.

On the part of those who wear *niqab* there is also the unspoken accusation that those who only wear a head-scarf are not quite good

enough and that there is another level they are meant to aspire to in order to be truly pious.

For their part, they feel they are setting a good example and showing complete obedience. They believe that to imitate the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) is the noblest aspiration and worth putting up with all the hurdles for. They feel disappointed that fellow Muslim women from whom they would expect more support are joining in the criticism of them.

Of course, this only goes for those who wear *niqab* or *hijab* out of conviction. There are numerous women who wear it automatically because it is expected of them by their families or because of cultural norms. They may never have given it a second thought and are totally oblivious to the debate that rages around their heads or to the attitudes they invoke in the minds of onlookers. They are quite unaware of the impression they may be giving. We will look at the *niqab* dimension in more detail in a later section.

The debate and issues need to be aired and dissected for the sake of the daughters of these women who are wearing Islamic dress automatically because it is much more likely that in the context of British society these young women will be making a conscious decision to wear it or not.

e) A French experience

It has been said that the British are subtle in their racism and their disapproval of something. Condemnation is likely to be silent but all the more deadly for that. Whether it comes from cowardice or good manners, it is often observed in a queue of British people that if any reprehensible behavior is going on such as pushing in, swearing

amongst the young or vandalism or a child being slapped about and screamed at by parents, the onlookers will fume slightly and shake their heads and only condemn something once the offenders are out of earshot. Britain is a place where you may be more likely to hear the phrase 'I would have said something but..' or 'I was going to say something but..'

This attitude is bound to change as the demographic mix of Britain changes but victims of racism and sexism especially in the professions will testify to how an atmosphere of subtle bullying can gradually spread around them so that they felt they were not welcome or liked but there was nothing overt about it or nothing they could put their finger on. Another employment controversy reported in 'The Muslim News' illustrates this typically British style of discrimination well. A *muhajjaba* who had qualified as a solicitor, Sufiah Abbasi was looking for experience as an 'outdoor clerk' for a Wembley law firm. During her interview, she was asked questions about her head-scarf, make-up and jewelry. The interviewer suggested that she 'reconsider' her head-scarf. 'I asked him whether he was suggesting that I would get the job if I removed my scarf. He repeated that I should reconsider', narrated Sufiah.

'Reconsider' is a very non-committal phrase which does not sound harsh in this narrative but when one imagines the facial expression that might have gone with it and the underlying message it is trying to convey, it is a very effective way of practising discrimination whilst expertly covering one's tracks and maintaining a virtuous image of upholding the law. The implication was that women who cover their hair were not wanted and were not good for the firm. Indeed Sufiah goes on to report that she was asked to assist counsel at a case at Willesden County Court. Sufiah was asked to remove her head-scarf

as she was told 'a young white female in a domestic violence case would not like it.' In fact, their assumptions about her client were proved wrong because when Sufiah asked the client in question about the matter, she said she did not mind her wearing the *hijab* 'as long as you can do the job.' When she reported this incident, her work from the firm dried up. According to the firm, they say 'it was never stated that there would be a problem if she wore a scarf' and that Ms Abbasi herself asked if the scarf would prejudice her chances of working at the firm.

Sufiah's purpose in bringing the complaints was to highlight the problems faced by Muslim women in the work-place. 'I want other women to be secure in the knowledge that they could wear *hijab* wherever they want and whatever job they are in,' she says.

In the British climate with all the labyrinth get-outs and obfuscation available to mask over prejudice, it is actually necessary to make this known loud and clear; for companies to state that no, *hijab* is not a problem here, not with employers, not with colleagues, not with clients.

In my own experience of job interviews whilst wearing *hijab* I have observed the reaction of the interviewer and tried to tune in to the attitude behind the correct words and smiles. I always prefer to bring up the '*hijab* question' myself and most times the interviewer has made quite a play of being taken by surprise by my question as if to say, 'strange that you should bring that up' when their body language and subtle verbal clues have shown me that the *hijab* has been noticed all right and the interviewer has already closed the door. Of course I cannot read human hearts and thus have no way of knowing whether the *hijab* had anything to do with my failure at interviews when I was reasonably competent at getting jobs in the days before *hijab*.

Significantly, since the time I started to wear *hijab* I have never passed an interview, neither for a job nor a course.

In such cases, if it is indeed down to the problem the scarf represents for employers who are not ready for *muahjjabat* and it is not just my paranoia, changing attitudes by positive experience of *hijabed* employees is not going to work if we cannot even get a foot in the door. This is why legislation in the first instance is necessary. One can sympathize with the employers trying to choose between prospective candidates. Which one is the more promising for this receptionist job as far as they are concerned: The pretty smiling courteous well-spoken girl with the tight suit and large blond hair or the pretty, smiling, courteous well-spoken girl in *jilbab* and head-scarf? Such attitudes militate against prospective candidates with all sorts of other disadvantages, not just *muahjjabat* but women with less pretty faces, with less attractive figures, with different accents or with disabilities

When seen in this way it is obvious that it is the work-place culture that needs to change to a large extent to become less focused on surface factors and this can only happen if good Muslims work through the ranks and this can only happen if good Muslims get a foot-hold in the first place. If they are forced to remove their *hijab* at the first hurdle the work-place culture then undermines their *iman* (faith) and if they refuse to remove it and then do not get the job then Allah has protected them from any harm that might have ensued from it. However if they get in to the work-place and keep their *hijab* along with their Islamic practice, the work-place culture will have to change to be more in harmony with Islamic values and that will be better for everyone in the long run.

I wanted to contrast the British attitude with the well-known story of the school-girls who fought for the right to wear *hijab* in school in France. The story was told on the BBC documentary, which formed part of the 'Planet Islam' series and was very revealing of the French attitude.

In the case of 'le foulard' the French did not pussy-foot around with hints and insinuations, subtle threats or inducements. No, they were direct, 'This is a secular country,' they declare. 'Religion has no part to play in public life and thus in the school-room. The wearing of the head-scarf is against the noble French culture of 'laïcité' or secularism. *Hijab* and other religious symbols are not allowed in the French classroom.' And you cannot say clearer than that.

So how did the unfortunate girls cope with this intransigence in one particular school? The two sisters in the story came from a Moroccan family and had been brought up in France. Nabila and Hind were expelled for wearing head-scarves in class thus displaying their religious beliefs in a conspicuous way. According to the establishment view in France, religion has no place in the classroom. The stand-off between the very brave, dignified girls and their intransigent teachers became quite a 'cause célèbre' in the little town of Albertville. According to the director of Jean Mouline lycée-college and his deputy and staff, the head-scarf represents a symbol of inferior status of women and that it denigrates women. No amount of protestations to the contrary would make them change this view. The obvious fact that the girls wanted to wear *hijab* for themselves as a mark of their Islamic identity, so much so that they were putting their education on the line, did not make the teachers and heads re-evaluate their view of *hijab* as a symbol of women's inferior status. They argued that the wearing of head-scarves was incompatible with the principles of equality.

The director declared that the head-scarves had been denounced by the whole school community. Later when the programme makers interviewed the girls' class-mates, the non-Muslim girls said it did not bother them in the least. The art teacher complained that the girls would not sit in class if nudity was displayed and he himself could not accept them with their head-scarves. The girls were briefly allowed in after a court ruling that allowed them to have their freedom of religious expression as long as they did not proselytize but their respite did not last after they were again expelled for talking about their rationale for *hijab* in the classroom.

Despite their determination to struggle on and use the law to get their rights the girls were above all hurt by the way they had been treated and there were many disappointed tears throughout the documentary. All they wanted was to have the school respect their real reasons and not assumed reasons for committing themselves to Islamic dress and their wish to contribute and participate in the education process as equals. But as we see, the French solution has been one of blocking, outlawing and forbidding and history shows us that repression makes people retreat into a corner and burn with resentment. It does not make their true feelings go away. It seems it makes the women all the more determined to cling to that 'piece of cloth' which is like a red rag to a bull for the establishment.

The strange thing is that where women are given freedom to wear *hijab* as they like, a much more clever method ensures that many shun *hijab*. In the media and in the popular icons *hijab* is never seen in connection with glamor, desirability and success. Style leaders in schools and colleges dress as non-Muslims and young women who want to fit in or to compete follow suit. Young women follow the style leaders and the *hijab* flies out the window without the authorities

having to do the least bit of banning. In Britain, if a woman does stick out from the crowd, subtle pressure soon draws her into line. Dress norms like viruses are catching.

This is something the committed *muhajjabat* have to be aware of. *Hijab* too has to be associated in people's minds with success and modern times. We are in a position to have to resist the association of our dress with backwardness or ugliness or it will be even harder for the younger generation to hold on to.

What came across in the documentary about the French case was the sense of sections of French society feeling under siege and of traditional French culture being somehow under threat. When the interviewer spoke to members of nationalist parties or young people with nationalist sympathies and to members of the French establishment, they spoke of these people who refuse to fit into French culture. 'They insist on keeping their own culture and they will not change', is their complaint. They said that Muslims like the Kourad sisters or young French Muslims from Algerian families with Islamic sympathies are refusing to blend into a society that welcomes them. The politician who says, 'if they cannot integrate, go home' forgets that France is supposed to be their home. Are they then not to be allowed to make their mark on the place they live like everyone else? People who say Muslims are clinging to a traditional culture while claiming to preserve their own lose sight of how in their own lives they have broken links with the past. If non-Muslim, nationalist French people were to look at their lifestyles, habits and values, how much could they say they still had in common with even their parents' generation? Paradoxically, it may be Islamic norms, which encourage towards purity of relationships between the sexes and public decency which might propel French society towards a more accurate version of

what traditional French culture was all about before sexual licence spread. Some very telling comments were made by some of the young Muslim men interviewed who lived in very deprived areas. Their remarks get to the heart of what their detractors are talking about when they say their culture is under threat. 'We do not eat pork or drink table wine. So what?' It is the challenge of Islam to the alcohol culture and other harms that troubles them. It is the society, which embraces what God has forbidden that is really under threat from Islamisation. With their *hijab* Muslim women do bring new culture and new values wherever they go or really is it just a revival of something that has been lost in the not very distant past in most societies. In the time of our grandmothers, Catholic women, even in their twenties would have to ask their parent's permission to meet a man in a public place to discuss engagement. Head-scarves used to be common in the UK and many European countries for married women especially in rural areas as recently as the fifties. Modern opponents of Islamic values say that distance between the sexes in the public sphere is a threat to 'traditional' culture of mixing between men and women but it is only very recently that modest values have broken down so completely. Before this age, women were modest and men's space was quite delineated. The establishment of today have actually undermined their own traditional values and now dress up their own norms as traditional whilst asking people like us to pay homage to these sacred values. All the Muslims are doing is trying to bring back the lost values, of strong family, solidarity between the generations and solid community life.

One of the sisters in the BBC programme was deeply upset when she said that she is not accepted as French in France and yet neither is she treated as a Moroccan in Morocco. Ironically, Morocco is

becoming more like France every day. It seemed hard for the young girl to have this harsh realization at such a young age but she comforted herself that she was a Muslim and would always be a Muslim and thus part of a far larger and more important family. This is well illustrated in the story of one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Salman the Persian had come to Medina to join the Muslim community although he had lived for a while in Mecca before. He had cut off from his own people when he was captured and embarked on a spiritual quest. Consequently he was uncertain of his identity, of which group he belonged to. Was he one of the Muhajirun who migrated to Medina or one of the Ansar the settled people of Medina who welcomed them? The Prophet (peace be upon him) settled the question with his own conclusion; *"Salman is a member of my family."*

For the Moroccan sisters and others like them, unsure of their identity is a world of labels what could be better than to be a member of the nation of Muhammad (peace be upon him)?

Chapter Six

The View from Outside

a) Islamophobia: a measured view

Islamophobia is a term quite recently coined meaning a fear of Islam, a fear which is regarded as irrational by its adherents. My interest in the phenomena was how far this was provoked by the sight of women dressed in modest clothes with heads covered, thus going against the norms of modern society.

We hear stories in the Muslim press about scarf pulling and name calling and sometimes quite serious violence or abuse. It is common during times of war on Muslim countries where visible Muslims are made to feel uncomfortable in the UK. They are assumed to have an automatic allegiance en masse to their fellow Muslims anywhere in the world. It is assumed that if a woman wears visible Islamic dress, then she is identifying with that tendency. This though seems to be another dimension of simple racism, an excuse for those to vent their frustrations who want Britain to be inhabited only by light-skinned natives with seven generations in the grave and zero migration. Despite the racist contingent, the sweep of public opinion in Britain is mostly against the governments' forays against Muslim countries and in sympathy and solidarity with Muslim people including new

immigrants. There was a lot of public defence of Muslims against racists in the media.

The media itself is often labelled as the chief exponent of Islamophobia. They obviously do not run to open abuse and threats but it is believed that the attitudes they perpetuate lead directly to the kind of hostility experienced in the street.

All the old bug bears about plural marriage, the veil, Islam and the sword, Islamic criminal penalties and women's subjugation are given a good airing in some sections of the press. However, it is not progressive to stereotype the media. Some newspapers also analyze Muslim lifestyle in depth, try to get behind the veil, as it is always put, and set up a window into the life of the angry young Muslim men of the West. Increasingly, practising Muslims are being given a voice to speak for themselves and put their case on a range of issues, most commonly the geopolitical situation for Muslims. Radio phone-ins and TV discussions regularly return to the themes of the attitudes on global issues of the Muslims in their midst. This gives hostile people a chance to express their often-justified grievances against Muslims in open debate while at the same time allowing them to hear the other side of the story.

As we have discussed in the section on the workplace, personal hostility towards other groups is part and parcel of life. What is not acceptable is if it means Muslims find themselves discriminated against in employment, education, services and public policy.

In a conference on Islamophobia in Edinburgh the principle of the Muslim college and popular spokesman on Islamic affairs, Zaki Badawi was sanguine about the period of turmoil that immigrants have to undergo. He reminded the audience that prejudice against

immigrants is a normal phenomenon regardless of race and religion. For example, despite their being culturally the same, the East Germans who made a new life in West Germany after reunification were not made welcome. When you add difference in race and on top of that, an alien culture, then the resistance to newcomers is magnified. He states that no society welcomes immigrants at first. The settled people even if they themselves were originally from immigrant stock will look upon the newcomers with suspicion and maybe hostility. For him, the remedy is for people to get to know each other better and to celebrate the variety that is brought by a new strand in the fabric of one's culture. We can learn and benefit from each other.

I agree with this view when observing how each wave of immigrants in various countries have gone through a period of hardship and then acceptance and a gradual putting down of roots in a new place. The fear and resentment of new immigrants reminds me of sibling rivalry. It seems to come from an unwillingness on the part of the settled group to share what they have with new-comers. Gradually as they get to know the new comers, they start to realize that the new-comers come not just with hands outstretched but also bearing gifts and the society is better for each new influx of people. The Qur'anic message is that Allah created man in different tribes and tongues so we might get to know each other. Variety is given as a blessing and it is one of the pleasures of life to learn about others.

There is no doubt that part of the hostility to *hijab* is bound up with hostility to immigrants; - they are taking what's ours - they are trying to change us-they want to destroy us and make us like them. The sight of Muslim women from white British families is the threat of 'our women going over to the other side.' These are the kinds of fears and attitudes which we have to understand exist in British

society. One of the main routes to overcome this is the passing on of accurate information about Islam and its practices. Therefore, one of the main roles of the *muhajjaba* in a multi-cultural society is education.

b) An exhibition on *hijab*

An exhibition was organized in Glasgow at St Mungo's museum of Religion. It was entitled 'The Veil in Islam' and brought together many of the issues we have been pondering in this book.

The organizers had put together testimonies and texts which gave visitors insight into the symbolism of the Islamic *hijab* and its perception.

I wanted to focus on some of the points that were brought up in the exhibition to give an overview of how *hijab* feels to the wearer and how it is perceived by the onlooker before discussing my surveys which I hope will give some more detail.

The exhibition threw up some of the myths surrounding the Islamic veil. For westerners they were both fascinated and repelled by it. It meant on the one hand that women were oppressed, that they were cloistered as slaves. It also conjured up images of the romantic Arabian princess. It was associated with a life of languid idleness and as something sensual, the veil being the invitation to see what was behind it, what was worthy of being hidden by a veil. The connotations of mystery and sensuality were brought from the nineteenth and twentieth century western male travelers who brought back their tales from the East. To them the Middle East experience fed their exotic fantasy of women enslaved to exist only to please men. During the period of colonization veiled women was one of the factors

which represented to the colonialists the backwardness and inferiority of Muslims and Islam. Thereby they would justify their imposition of occidental values. They were liberating the oppressed women of Araby from their enslavement to men.

Following this theme, that the abandonment of the veil would represent liberty and equality for women, the exhibition illustrated it with a few key dates. 1920 was the year that Ataturk banned the veil in Turkey along with Islamic dress in general for men and women. In 1921, the King of Afghanistan also tried to abolish it but failed. In 1923 Egyptian feminists, Huda Sha`rawi and Saiza Nabarawi used their dress as a symbol of their ideas and spoke against Islamic dress. The Shah of Iran in 1936 also tried and failed to ban it. These attempts all went hand in hand with attempts to so called 'modernize' the country and follow progress. We can see how significant women's dress was in this political shift by the attempts to legislate for it.

In the opposite direction, the exhibition charted the re-emergence of Islamic dress in Muslim countries as a sign of morality and authenticity of religious adherence. One example involves legislation in favour of *hijab* in Iran after the revolution, which ushered in compulsory Islamic dress.

Taking veiling as a historical phenomenon, the exhibition noted that early Greeks and Romans veiled their respectable high-class women, as did those of Assyria and Babylon to reflect their dignity and higher status.

The exhibit went on to explore the meaning of the Islamic veil now. It signifies modesty. It commands respect. It has the force of a wider political statement in that it is a sign of rejection of permissive western values and a tool of political protest. There are also many

women who wear Islamic dress out of obedience to their husbands. According to the Islamic thinker and activist, Zaynab al-Ghazali, the requirement of law for women's Islamic dress must be backed up and reinforced by the other laws on sexual temptation that are given in Islam. She recommends that women should not be forced to wear *hijab* by legislation but persuaded.

According to Sherifa Zahoor, a visiting Egyptian professor at MIT, Islamic dress helps men to treat women as peers and intellectual equals. In this way, her attractiveness as a woman is drawn into the background by her dress so that her public face can come to the fore.

In Algeria, urban Islamically oriented women wear the long *jilbab* and the longer covering head-scarves as a mark of their attachment to Islam and the political agenda they are calling for, whereas rural women are often less politically aware and tend to wear smaller or patterned head-scarves without the *jilbab* or the older women wear a white dress or wrap. This marks the difference between those wearing longer clothes or a head-scarf as a cultural norm or because of family pressure without much awareness of what it signifies and those making a conscious decision to show their commitment to Islam.

In a country such as Iran where Islamic dress became a matter of law, the donning of a chador actually opened doors to public life and did not mean that women were required to lead lives in seclusion.

Illustrating the tricky problem of finding work as a *muhajjaba*, the exhibition talked about how a Malay girl went for an interview without *hijab* and then turned up for work wearing it.

Zaki Badawi, whose explanation of the immigration process we have looked at, has argued that what we know as Islamic dress is not required for women. Going in a different direction to the majority of

Islamic scholars on this issue, he thinks of it as an innovation. Akbar Ahmed, a Muslim programme maker does agree with the majority opinion that *hijab* is required but feels there is far too much emphasis placed on dress. He urges people to go beyond dress and to explore books and ideas.

Exploring attitudes to *hijab*, according to the exhibition it has been seen at times as a feminist statement or as a sign of moral awakening. By others it is seen as the enemy of civilization and advancement and its abandonment as a victory for non-Muslims. For some, to be fully covered is as powerful a statement as it would be to go outside naked.

Muhammad al-Ghazali has pointed out that women's dress has been an easy thing to focus on for Muslims at times of weakness and indecision. It distracts them from tackling equally vital issues. An explanation for this has been put forward amongst Muslim thinkers, that the period of colonialism left great sections of the Muslim *ummah* feeling emasculated and powerless. Having been stripped of their economic, political and intellectual pillars, men were all the more desperate to cling to the one aspect of power that remained to them, authority over their women.

Quoting from Fatima Mernissi's book, the exhibition pointed out the semantic aspects of the word *hijab*. It means 'to hide'.

Its spatial element is to form a threshold, its ethical element to delineate forbidden space.

Visitors to the exhibition then had a chance to hear some contemporary testimonies about wearing *hijab*.

One of the *muhajjabat* in the video said it allowed her to go about freely, to protect and guide actions and reinforces her strength as a Muslim. She is constantly reminded of her Islam when going outside

which guides her steps. People often assume she is foreign until they hear her Scottish accent. The woman felt the need to be ready to answer questions and make the first move to reassure people when she sensed they had doubts or questions. Sometimes they hesitate to ask, as one sister said about her lecturer. It forced people to have to adjust to Muslim women and reassess their assumptions, making room for our experience in their consciousness. Some Scottish Muslim women from white families had to contend with racism after wearing *hijab* being perceived as having joined another racial team, so to speak, by virtue of wearing the scarf. At the same time they were treated with greater respect by Muslim shopkeepers. The *muhajjabat* got support and confidence from each other and felt there was no reason not to have confidence to be yourself in the UK. It was felt that there is an over-riding politeness and acceptance still prevalent in British society. One woman wanted to be herself and reflect her true identity in her outward look, so she chose *hijab*. Muslim women who feared wearing *hijab* were afraid of being looked down on by Muslim women and felt that if they wore *hijab* there would be no doubt about their Muslim identity. They were not at ease to be in this kind of dilemma.

One of the women featured in the exhibition said that you leave your *hijab* ready by the door just like a hat and coat and when you go out it helps to regulate your attitude and behavior to be in line with what is pleasing to Allah. Another woman said that like Islam, *hijab* was there to enfold you.

c) Responses to *hijab*: Some public strategies

It was in her well-known book, 'Women in Islam' that Fatima Mernissi used the notion of claiming public space to set out her thesis against *hijab*. As we have seen nearly all mainstream scholars of Islam

believe that there is no argument about the necessity of *hijab* for Muslim women but Mernissi raised concerns that need to be addressed. Increasingly, it is true that in many Muslim countries the wearing of *hijab* can be a serious disadvantage to women wanting to play a full part in society. Part of the problem is that modern Muslim society is organized along the lines of western industrialized society. In this kind of framework women are compelled to come out of their homes and communities and leave their children and other charges in order to become economically active. In the debate about home versus work, Muslim women have come to think that the two are mutually exclusive, as have western women. It is common to hear statements such as; 'I do not work. I stay home and look after my children.' Others claim, 'I have to work or I would go mad.'

In the Islamic and indeed traditional understanding, being economically active does not only mean working outside the home or community. Consider the women all over the world, Muslims among them who farm and trade, teach and nurse, manufacture and supply all within a community framework. Moreover, many Muslim women neither want nor need to work outside their home and community. Attaining an education is not always a matter of leaving one's community to take a place in an institution. Many Muslim women seek practical education in skills which can be learnt from close family. Others use computers and books to get their education in the home or learn from teachers at home, either relatives or tutors coming from outside. For such women playing a full part in society means being respected by others, treated as a full and equal citizen and being made to feel they have something to offer, not just being tolerated to scurry about the streets gathering their shopping and rushing home to cower behind a door until their 'oppressor' gets home. They do not

want to be an object of pity for their Muslim sisters who have flung their *hijab* to the four winds and liberated themselves to work in a 'tap-tap' job they have to pay to commute to or to make up the numbers for colleges to give them an accredited education or to socialize in a world where women have to compete to flutter around men.

For such women a notion of reclaiming public space does not mean laying claim to our corner of a man's world. It is more in line with a vision of the traditional 'medina' or Muslim city of old. Here women live and work closely with each other all co-operating with each other and mutually dependant. In the woman's quarter women claim their right to handle their own affairs.

In a modern Muslim country where this strong women's sphere is absent, women who enter the public arena have to do so alongside men. In this context, where the majority of the population are Muslim, the *muhajjaba* is supposed to be the norm and the 'open hair' woman as they say in Turkey, the exception. Public policy should make it easier to move about if you are wearing *hijab*, not form a barrier to wearing it. Unfortunately, in Turkey in recent years they had turned the tables to such an extent that a woman wearing *hijab* was simply not allowed to enter higher education. Other symbols of Islamic adherence such as beards for men and learning of Arabic were also seriously curtailed. This was especially the case if one had a job in the public sector or if one wanted to advance in one's company. I have even heard that praying on time was frowned upon in Turkey, Tunisia and other Muslim countries and that men who frequent the mosque were looked upon with suspicion. This is despite the fact that regular prayer is the very minimum requirement for a Muslim. The attitude came as a result of the continuation of the secularization of Turkey

under Ataturk which began early in the twentieth century in a country which is nearly a hundred percent Muslim. There is no doubt that for those who want to steer Turkey into the twenty first century and prepare it to join the European Union, whatever hoops they jump through to try and please their 'sophisticated Euro friends' the head-scarf is an embarrassing reminder of Islam that they cannot tolerate. They need their women to behave more like non-Muslim women to prove to the world that they are progressive. The scarf is associated with political radicals and fanatics as in France and also with backwardness.

Surely, though this intransigence would only be worsened if a *muhajjaba* cannot get an education in the country. One *muhajjaba* MP who won a seat in the Turkish parliament was prevented from taking it up. There was no struggle in Turkish political society, the judiciary or in the workplace to be accepted as competent or beneficial as a *muhajjaba*. They were simply blocked from the very start. One wonders if changes in the political scene might alleviate this high-handed approach.

In other Muslim countries, more subtle forces were at work. I noticed in Tunisia that older women wore the Tunisian white *'abaya* and head-scarf whilst younger women dressed as non-Muslim Frenchwomen. Many older city women also resembled their non-Muslim French counterparts. Were the education system and the media promoting a kind of obsolescence for *hijab*? In Egypt which has a significant population of educated, Islamically aware women, outright prohibition as in Turkey would be very difficult. Instead, one sees the promotion of Western, revealing clothes, elaborate hair-dos and make-up through role models in popular dramas and youth culture. If you watch Egyptian television and then look out of your

Cairo window, unless you were staying in the swankiest part of Cairo, you would see very little resemblance between what is shown on the screen and the scene on the ground. Slowly, however these soap operas portraying the role models people aspire to have their effect as they have done in Britain since the fifties. Dresses get shorter and more revealing and trousers tighter and more revealing for both sexes. Head-covers disappear for both sexes. Incidentally, to go out without a hat was to go out underdressed also in Britain until the middle of last century. Ties appear and the transformation takes root. As a result of advertising and television in Britain the ownership of white goods, use of detergents and toiletries, use of packaged and processed and convenience foods have all increased exponentially. DIY and foreign holidays, for example, have become almost universal. Only a small anti-consumer minority are questioning our throwaway lifestyle and environmentally expensive choices.

When we look at some of the Middle Eastern advertising, we can see lifestyle changes following the same pattern as have occurred in the West.

Whereas in the past Egyptians, for example, might have used soaps and cleaning agents made from local ingredients which are biodegradable in the local environment, we now see the gradual encroachment of chemical detergents produced by multi-national giants which are not beneficial to the waters. The powders are even sold in handy sachets so that you can see the poorer women washing by the Nile, as they must have done for aeons but now with their little sachet, only sold under a local name. Who can blame them when they find it effective and easy and they've seen it on television? The purity of the Nile is not their problem. They have enough problems to contend with. Very few of us in the West use environmentally beneficial soaps.

In the same way, role models work their magic so that each generation is set to have a higher proportion of uncovered women. Still in Egypt the resistance is strong but when a young girl sees all the admirable people on the screen and in the magazines, the ones their parents stop everything for at the sacred soap time every night, who can blame them if they try to imitate? The pressure is relentless.

It then becomes more of a challenge for the committed *muhajjaba* to resist the impulse to imitate the idols on the screen.

However, it is crucial for the cohesion of society that these women act as bulwarks against societal breakdown and the erosion of the integrity of the Islamic family.

It is in the arena of the class-room where recent moves to curtail *hijab* have centred. Moves to ban evidence of religious adherence in France have been in the headlines. The argument of those calling for the ban is that in a diverse and multicultural society with people of all religions and none it is imperative that public servants adhere to a common code of dress. This code must conform to the standards set by the secular establishment. It is a similar story in Singapore where the government is wary of being seen to make concessions for one group over another in public schools. Despite the fact that Islam is one of the main religions in the country, they want Muslim staff and pupils to fall in with the standard that suits their own version of the multi-cultural and multi-religious society. Other countries are interested in following this model.

The European countries, especially, see themselves as protecting the youth from indoctrination or bias on the part of teachers. The excuse given is that wearing of a head-scarf is a sign of Islamic adherence bordering on extremism. They are also anxious that the

Muslim girls under their protection who have chosen not to wear *hijab* for one reason or another will not be unduly influenced by *muhajjaba* teachers. This would undermine all their efforts at separating a generation from their religion.

Even in Saudi Arabia western media has set themselves up as the champion of women's rights by supporting those women who wish to appear in public uncovered.

The onus is on the older generation of *muhajjabat* to provide good role models for the young. The youth need to observe that observing proper Islamic dress does not go hand in hand with negative characteristics and unnecessary restrictions. Modern society both in the West and the Muslim world makes it all too easy to step across the boundaries that have been set by Allah and dress is one of the quickest routes to this downfall.

If young people see that women wearing *hijab* are the ones who are always polite in shops, gracious to older people by letting them go first, who are quick to offer a hand and a listening ear, they will be attracted to the *hijab* culture. Women who take an interest in young people and are not afraid to correct and guide them, take responsibility for helping out with activities for them and make their homes a welcoming place for their children's friends are the ones who those young people would like to imitate.

It is also important that *muhajjabat* play their role in community affairs by turning up at local meetings or trying to support action groups that are calling for something good such as health promotion and road safety. The more Muslim women get involved, the more they can claim public space as their own, on their own terms as women who observe Islamic limits. *Hijab* was given precisely so that Muslim

women can operate in the public sphere bringing what they have to offer to the world outside.

d) Some views from non-Muslims

As well as reflecting some of the experience of my Muslim sisters with regard to their *hijab*, I wanted also to have an idea of how it was perceived from the other side.

After all, the *hijab* is there for the onlookers as a signal to them. It is a popular belief that there is great ignorance about Islam amongst non-Muslims in the west. It is also thought that there is a great deal of prejudice and negative feelings towards Muslims, especially head-scarved women and bearded men.

I asked British and American correspondents of various ages and backgrounds to answer some questions about *hijab*. Did they have any idea what it meant or the issues behind it? While as we have seen it is a key issue amongst Muslims themselves; was this also the case for non-Muslims or was it a matter of indifference for them, not something worth thinking about too deeply? How much did they expect Muslim women to conform to what is often known as the 'host' society and what was their understanding given that some professing Muslims wore *hijab* and others did not?

Quite a few of the older correspondents, especially men did not know what the word '*hijab*' meant. Those who did were mostly younger females and they described it as either a head-scarf or head-dress or a veil. One of the older men stated it was specifically a head-dress for Arab women. None of the respondents understood the *hijab* as a whole concept and so like many Muslims, as we have seen, associated the word only with the head-cover. Nearly all the

respondents had Muslims friends or colleagues and a few had Muslim relatives but those with Muslims in the family did not seem to have any greater awareness.

When I asked why they thought some Muslim women wore Islamic dress outside, most explained it as either a religious custom or tradition. There were many who knew that it was the women's own choice as an expression of her religious beliefs while others thought it was mainly because they were required to dress like this by their husbands and fathers or by their governments. One suggested that it was because men thought women's bodies were evil.

Many of the females knew that it was a requirement of Islamic law that women do not show themselves except to their husbands and quite a few mentioned modesty.

I imagined it would be confusing for non-Muslims to be told that *hijab* was required by Islam when they must have had lots of experience of women who did not wear it. When I asked why they thought some women did not wear it, one of my respondents said that they thought it was a tradition that was out of date. Some assumed that these women were not very religious. One of the American females said they must be 3-5% Muslim. Others regarded them as brave and applauded their exercising of their choice. Some wondered if refusing to wear *hijab* was a way some women had for rebellion against what they disagreed with in their family or society.

The point was also made by some that there were Muslim women who had decided that this mode of dress was not suitable for western society and they had a desire to conform to the prevailing standards.

The face-cover was also thought to be part of religious tradition and an expression of modesty. Several respondents assumed women

who wore *niqab* were ultra religious akin to Hasidic Jews or extremely devout. The point was made again that it could be something imposed on women either by the husband or the society. One of the British women could not imagine why anyone would like to cover her face. Another suggestion put forward was that these women did not wish to be recognized outside. One of the respondents who were quite accepting of women's right to wear *hijab* in any country nevertheless had a great aversion to the Saudi style full face-cover and *'abaya*. She felt Muslim women living in the West should make an effort to wear a form of Islamic dress which was more in keeping with their environment. She felt respect should be a reciprocal thing. Since she was willing to respect Muslim values when staying in Muslim countries and not wear revealing clothes such as beach wear, she preferred that Muslim women did not wear face-cover and *'abaya* in her country.

Most of the respondents confessed to knowing very little about Islamic law on dress for women but there was a general misunderstanding that *shari'ah* law was something separate or over and above Islam itself. They described *shari'ah* as being more strict and assumed it was because of *shari'ah* that some women wore a burqa. People seemed to have picked up a notion from the press that there is strict *shari'ah* fundamental Islam and alongside a kind of 'cuddly' Islam that is more at home in western society. One respondent shrewdly observed that Islamic law differs from country to country and government to government. Generally, it was seen as something optional that a Muslim was at liberty to take on board or not.

Nearly all the respondents were able to recognize a woman as distinctly Muslim by her dress. I wondered if there was some ambiguity between Muslims and Hindus or Sikhs. In Britain, it was a

common sight to find members of the Hare Krishna community canvassing in the street. They were often white converts and wore long dresses, like saris and thin veils. To the casual observer I wondered if they might be confused with Muslims but it seemed that the Islamic dress was quite distinctive to the observer.

Only one or two respondents found the *hijab* off-putting. One young woman accountant confessed to finding the *niqab* disturbing and thought it dehumanized women even though she had no problem with *hijab*. The rest of the people surveyed felt comfortable around women in *hijab* and said it did not bother them at all. Some of the women wondered if they might be seen themselves as over-bearing considering that many of these women might be quite modest and shy.

Two of the common objections to *hijab* are that it is impractical especially for sport and that it is too hot in summer. Most of the respondents stated that they did not think it was impractical except for sport or working with machinery. As for hot weather, it was considered illogical that this was a problem as many Muslim women came from the world's hottest countries and the *hijab* could act as a shade from the sun. It was conceded that black might not be the best choice of color in hot countries.

Most of the Americans thought it would be too hot. Presumably, as they have had more experience of hot summers particularly in the south than the average British person.

Most of the respondents agreed with the principle that modesty in public was a good thing and very few of them thought it was a requirement for a woman to look attractive when outside. Women especially felt that it was a matter of individual choice whether a woman wanted to appear attractive outside. Despite the assumption of

many Muslims that western women do their utmost to flaunt themselves outside, it seems that this is not seen as a priority. Rather like losing weight, many women regard making oneself attractive as something you do for yourself and your own satisfaction rather than for the benefit of men. There is a section of western society who believe modesty to be a negative thing and I thought this would color their views about the whole idea of *hijab* but it was generally felt by the group that modesty was desirable in public places but not something to be taken to extremes.

When I asked whether head-scarves would be seen as something bad for business in the workplace most of the respondents stated that in a multi-cultural society this should not be the case. They did not believe employers had any right to discriminate on this point and that people should be taken on merit. It would obviously depend on the nature of the work place. One or two of the older women believed that it could be seen as off-putting in the West. I asked this question because of my observation that even in Muslim countries, the culture of the workplace seems to work against *hijab*. Women employees are often required to use their personal attractiveness or style to represent the company.

Regarding whether it would be difficult to get to know women in *hijab*, that would depend on several factors according to the correspondents. For some the *hijab* made them more cautious or reserved towards these women. It was felt that some Muslim women had no desire to make friends with non-Muslims. There would need to be a shared interest perhaps children or a job and it would be possible to find some common ground. Again some non-Muslims were concerned that they might be seen as too forward to some *muhajjabat*. Also the opportunities to meet Muslim women were quite limited.

For men I asked if they thought women in *hijab* were showing respect for men and they replied with an emphatic no. Only one respondent thought it showed respect but for Muslim men only.

Radio phone-ins reflect a popular opinion that people coming into the society should follow the norms of the majority. In fact, my respondents mostly disagreed. They recognized the diversity in modern society and the liberal requirement for tolerance. They were mostly prepared for Muslim women to dress outside the norm provided this tolerance was reciprocal. This brought the tricky scenario of the tolerated *muhajjaba* having to tolerate the sight of women in bikinis parading in the street. Most of the respondents thought there was a sensible balance whereby people could co-exist in relative harmony. Those in my survey who believed that people should fit in with the majority in society were mainly from the older generation.

It was agreed that people should be allowed to manifest their religion in any place but within limits. The limits seemed to be that they did not antagonize or annoy others. To wear *hijab* in a blatant way to make a point was seen as a negative thing and counter productive to the smooth running of a multi-cultural society. As long as they did not infringe the law then religious observance was seen as acceptable. In this question, a couple of respondents referred to subversive plots and I felt that they had associated *hijab* with groups who plan to launch attacks on civilians.

I gave a few adjectives to help the respondents sum up their feelings towards women in *hijab*. The most commonly chosen was respect or tolerance and for some indifference. A couple of the women chose pity and only one man mentioned disapproval.

I was pleased with the general tendency of the answers. The respondents were mostly liberal minded people who professed themselves to be open-minded and willing to accept other people's choices with the proviso that their choices were accepted in return.

This is the sticking point for people of faith. It is the nature of being a strong believer that it cancels out other beliefs or disapproves of certain practices and beliefs. For Muslims this are clearly marked out in the revelation. This is what makes Muslims stand out from the liberal consensus as a people who are against alcohol, gambling, adultery and usury and for whom prayer fasting and charity are a way of life. In a society where ideas about the unseen have become something of a joke, they put Allah at the centre of life and have a firm belief in prophets and scriptures, the Day of Judgement, Heaven and Hell. Given this huge gulf it made me wonder what the limits of this tolerance were. How far could Muslims be allowed to manifest their religion and propagate it before it became too uncomfortable for the liberal consensus?

From my respondents answers I found there was more awareness of the issue than previously thought and a mood of good will and live and let live especially among the younger women.

e) Some reasons for hostility

If Muslims have strong views either way, we can also reflect on what lies behind the strong reaction of many non-Muslim women towards Muslim women's dress. In the documentary about the French schoolgirls the viewer saw a couple of quite hostile reactions to the girls' decision. When they were briefly allowed back into class, one of the teachers actually took the trouble to hand out leaflets to all the girls' schoolmates explaining why the judgement was wrong, that it

threatened France's sacred laicite. Later a young woman was interviewed in a bar favoured by people who had resentment towards Muslims. They explained that it was wrong for the girls to wear scarves and that, like a boy's cap, it should be taken off in class.

Muslim women's dress is especially seen as a threat to women in general and in the eyes of many, the behavior that is associated with *hijab* stands as a direct threat to the freedoms women have fought for over many decades. To them the sight of a woman in the street covered is a challenge to their own dress choices. They feel their morality is being called into question and their liberal values threatened. In this case it's not always 'laissez faire', everyone can wear what they like because this choice that Muslim women have made seems too extreme a challenge to the accepted norms. The public space that women in the West have fought for and feel they deserve and is rightfully theirs is somehow being eroded by these women who feel it necessary to cover themselves in public spaces. The right they have won to display their looks openly and to search for partners independently with complete freedom of choice seems lost by these women who challenge this idea and say it is wrong to display your private self indiscriminately in the public arena and that irregulated pairing off can be disaster for society.

Women expect a degree of solidarity from other women and usually work harder than men to get consensus on issues. The *hijab* woman's refusal to join in the liberal consensus is an affront to many and others feel pity for the *muhajjaba* because she cannot enjoy the freedoms that they have.

Another possible reason for hostility to women in *hijab* is the impression that some give off. There is a type of behavior which is more surly than modest and which goes completely against the

cheerful friendliness which is expected in public in the West. I have seen women in *hijab* being served by non-Muslim women in shops who complete the entire transaction without a glance, a smile or even a word. They slam down their money and take back the change without a thank-you. I noticed this was often the case with women wearing the face-cover. Presumably, in lowering their eyes and being unobtrusive they were giving off an impression of rudeness.

Other kinds of rude behavior, quarrelling with public officials and shop staff, dropping litter and allowing children to run amok all add to this negative impression. My correspondents who were wearing *hijab* often mentioned this feeling of being representative of Muslim women in general. They made a special effort to be polite and friendly whilst still staying within the bounds of Islamic decency.

Whenever Muslims fail to live up to their religion, then the signs of being Muslim such as Islamic dress will be a warning sign rather than something positive to the eyes of the onlooker. If people from Muslim countries have a reputation for being crooked in business, unable to live up to agreements or contracts, grasping of public funds or prepared to cheat the social security system then all will be tarred with the same brush. Here the hostility is directed at those people and the *muhajjaba* as a representative of that people rather than against Islam or the *hijab* itself. The general public can be forgiven for not knowing much about Islam and what Muslims should be doing if the local population are busy serving them alcohol and lottery tickets rather than giving them a good model of Islam. No matter what they may hear about Islam, it is to the Muslims in their area that they look for living evidence.

The final element in hostility is mistrust. This is where the media can be said to have played their role. The reporting of acts of violence

whether by individuals, groups or nations are always associated with the Muslim identity but almost never with groups from other religions. Nobody balks at the term Muslim terrorist or even Islamic terrorist but the phrase Buddhist terrorist jars on the ear, it being so unfamiliar in the public discourse. This indicates how embedded in the public discourse the idea of Muslims and random violence have come to be associated with each other.

The nature of unexpected and indiscriminate acts of violence against civilians, which are still very rare, creates an atmosphere of mistrust on the part of the target community. Since their opponents have not spelt out their grievances nor given fair warning of their intentions, the people operate in an atmosphere of latent anxiety. This feeling of vulnerability is often discharged on Muslim women in *hijab* as visible representatives of the Muslims who are feared and mistrusted.

Whereas the rationale of the whole concept of *hijab* and the home based role is protection for women, wearing Islamic dress in a sometimes hostile society where Muslims are unfairly blamed for injustices puts the women squarely in the front line.

f) Education-the key to rapprochement

Whether it is a question of combating misinformation about random acts of violence and countering hostility towards *hijab* or whether one is reaching out to those who see *muhaqqabat* as an object of pity, good education is the key.

Muslims need to make their voices heard and join in the public debate on the airwaves in the print media with all their limitations in order to point out unfairness and misinformation. They need to close the gap between the imagined life of the Muslim woman and the real

experience. Muslim women share the concerns of everyone else about education and the health service, transport and the environment.

For women who feel pity for Muslim neighbors or colleagues a good solution is a visit at home. Though there is an opinion amongst Islamic scholars that Muslim women should remain in full *hijab* in the company of non-Muslim women, others have said that they can appear as they would before their male relatives that are in a more relaxed manner. When guests visit a Muslim woman at home they see what is behind the screen with all its warmth and advantages. They find out that the beautiful hair-care, stylish clothes, make-up and jewelry are reserved for the woman's inner life. It is normal for women to admire the beauty and adornments of others and it makes more of an impression when they normally see the Muslim woman in a very plain outfit. Questions are raised in the visitor's head when she realizes that the Muslim woman is supposed to reserve her best look for her own husband and dress down when she goes out. She does not reserve her best look for every stranger outside the home. The logic of dressing down for your partner and putting on your best look to go out, even for a trip to the supermarket, is questioned. The idea of requiring your partner to dress up for other men so that they can say what a lucky man you are is seen as something illogical. Muslim men do not appreciate other men admiring their wives or making comments about their looks whilst in non-Muslim circles it is taken as a compliment even as the 'admirer' is encircling your 'catch' with interest. Even though non-Muslim women may not agree with a Muslim perspective, education in the rationale of *hijab* at least leaves her with renewed respect for a Muslim woman's way of life rather than pity.

Education is also a good strategy for the hostile woman but can be done in a more formal setting with rational arguments showing how

all the aspects of Muslim life and practice fit together. They will see how *hijab* is a factor which helps to hold the correct boundaries which lead to a cohesive family and thus a cohesive society. Just one in-depth discussion with a Muslim can shed light on the whole *hijab* question and may have reverberations on people for sometime after. From then on, every time they see a *muhajjaba*, their mind is likely to go back to their conversation and they are unlikely to have misconceptions about *hijab* and be able to reflect a little more.

In London and other large cities school-children are growing up amongst Muslims and being educated alongside them. A non-Muslim girl may well follow her Muslim school-friend's journey as she braves her first day with *hijab* at school, worries about PE and keeps her distance from boyfriend discussions. While there is no doubt that many of the young Muslims of the West today are in danger of having their faith eroded there is movement in the other direction. Beyond the leaflets, exhibitions and seminars on Islam are the everyday encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims in schools and the workplace and the public sphere. The more non-Muslims meet with, relate to and discuss with *muhajjabat* the more they will understand and perhaps admire the philosophy behind their dress.

Chapter Seven

The Experience

I carried out a survey amongst some Muslim friends and acquaintances of theirs. I tried to get a sample including recent and long established converts, women from Pakistani, Arab or other backgrounds who had been brought up as Muslims and women from various Muslim countries who had come to Britain to live or study. Most of those surveyed were living in Scotland at the time of the survey.

Some of my correspondents wore *hijab* and others did not but still identified themselves as Muslims.

I wanted to explore how significant *hijab* was as a mark of attachment to Islam and to look a little at the transition period and adaptation of dress in gradual stages.

Then I wanted to chart a day to day experience of the women regarding how they feel when walking outside and in various public places and how their *hijab* choices have impacted on them in education, the workplace or other areas. I have tried to bring out how it feels from the point of view of the wearer and how they feel others see them.

A secondary issue is to look at some of the tensions and attitudes that exist between Muslims for *hijab* and non-*hijab* wearers and between advocates of *niqab* and those who do not wear it.

In carrying out my survey I wanted to explore how women felt about wearing *hijab* in public. I also wanted to analyze what lies at the bottom of people's attitude to *hijab*.

I asked questions about the reaction of those close to the Muslim women in the survey and how women were perceived in the street, on public transport, at work or in education, in clubs, at the shops and at the school-gates and how this reaction reflected back on the women's choice of dress. I was interested in the women's experience of both favourable and unfavorable remarks or looks as well as attitudes transmitted. My sample can only serve as an illustration of the experience around the country as many of my correspondents were living in the Scottish central belt at the time but I felt that I had come across a sample of diverse experience, enough to shed light on the issue from various angles.

a) Newcomers

My first group of interviewees were women who had just started wearing *hijab* at the time of the interview. Four of them had embraced Islam as converts and one was from a Muslim family for whom starting to wear *hijab* marked her renewed commitment to her faith.

- Carole had recently embraced Islam when I met her. She was a Scottish convert and had started out wearing a head-scarf to the mosque as a mark of respect. She had come to the mosque to get more knowledge about the religion.

She then made the decision to try it outside for the first time. She was wearing western clothes with a white scarf worn slightly off the forehead. She had learnt the *fiqh* (Islamic rulings) of *hijab* from books and from other Muslim women.

She had not yet had the confidence to tell her family and friends about her Islam and very much wished she could develop more confidence about it and about the *hijab* as the outward sign of her new beliefs.

She had a great respect for women who wore *hijab* and already was very aware of them in the street and felt some fellow feeling with them. They treated her as an equal and with no hostility before she wore *hijab*.

She understood that some women wanted to go further and cover their faces and she did not have a problem with that choice.

The self-consciousness of wearing *hijab* in the street made her feel like she was behaving suspiciously. It felt very awkward as if people were staring. On the bus three small boys kept turning round to stare at her but she managed to cope with the embarrassment. She could not help being very aware of people's reactions even though many of them might not have even noticed her.

Carole felt very at home in the mosque when wearing *hijab* and quite pleased with herself that she had worked up the courage to wear it outside like the other women.

Generally, it was a mixture of pride and embarrassment and she realized that this was something new, but in time it would be quite an everyday thing.

- Fauzia had just recently begun to wear *hijab* at the time of the interview. She was from a Pakistani family and had spent part of her

childhood in the Middle East and then came to live in the UK as a teenager. She was wearing *hijab* full time. She adapted western clothes to the Islamic requirements choosing long dresses or skirts but very rarely trousers with long jumpers and cardigans.

Her decision was inspired by her sister who had started to commit to *hijab* but had found it difficult with some lack of support. Her decision also came with a resolution to tighten up her Islamic practice in general and become more serious. Although she knew from other Muslims and her reading that *hijab* was compulsory, at first she tried to think up reasons to avoid it.

When she started wearing it she found it something of a struggle and had the impression that everyone on the train was staring but realized it was her own self-consciousness. It took a lot of courage for her to inform her boss that she was going to wear it but she felt she should let her employers know about her renewed commitment to her faith. The boss tried to dissuade her from starting to wear *hijab* although he was quite sanguine about her religious ideas. Once she began to wear it they were surprised but supportive.

Her first day in *hijab* at work was very difficult as she thought all the secretaries were looking at her and she got some strange looks and some comments and questions. She strengthened herself with *du'a'* (supplication) to Allah to help her get over the embarrassment and as it was Ramadan, it made it much easier and she could perceive it as a test of faith. Once she had got over the initial awkwardness of appearing in this way in front of different people it was normalised and people began to accept her new look.

Fauzia's family had already dealt with the issue with her sister. They believed one did not have to wear it and that she might not be

strong enough to deal with the problems but this made Fauzia more determined to try. It came as a shock to Fauzia's brother as he had admired her fashion sense and style and they had a good bond with shared interests and ideas. For him this was an indication that their lifestyles were starting to diverge. Fauzia's other sister who did not wear *hijab* felt quite protective towards her and was also worried about discrimination. Over time, as is usually the case, her family became very supportive.

Fauzia had mostly non-Muslim friends when she became more serious about Islam and they tried to dissuade her. One said she had become too good to be true and asked her to promise not to wear 'that ugly scarf'. It seems this visible evidence of Islamic commitment is the bug-bear whereas people can often tolerate the invisible Muslimah quite well. As is often the case in religious matters, some friends thought she was being brain-washed or pressurized. Though they supported her in other ways, inevitably they drifted apart as they no longer shared the same values and lifestyle.

She sympathized very much with those who did not wear *hijab* out of ignorance as she had experienced it herself. Yet she disapproved of those who know it is required and failed to wear it because it is as if they were putting other things before Allah and cared more what others thought of them than to obey Allah.

She was aware of a barrier between herself and those who wore *niqab* and did not find these sisters very friendly. She felt that when Muslim women who do not wear *hijab* see her they feel some inadequacy on their part. She also got the feeling that her family members who did not wear it got tired of her insistence about it. Fauzia saw the *niqab* as a question to herself as to whether or not she should wear it.

Out in the street she got mostly friendlier reactions than before she wore *hijab* especially from elderly people. Younger women often smiled at her and more beggars asked her for money. Once a little girl assumed she did not understand English. It seems head-scarves are associated with foreigners more than skin color alone. At times some bullying girls would try to stare her down and she was once jeered at by some young men in a car on a day when she was wearing a particularly large head-scarf.

At work in environmental science, her employers and co-workers became very supportive and quite admired the fact that she had the courage of her convictions. They assumed she would take her scarf off after Ramadan and then Fauzia explained her new understanding of when and why it should be worn.

She felt very much part of the scene at the mosque and at Islamic gatherings. There is a certain amount of cliquey behavior that she observed in these circles and she felt you had to be quite assertive to introduce yourself to new people.

She had a bad experience at the dentist when the practitioner insisted she take her *hijab* off but no problems on public transport and good, friendly service in both Muslim and non-Muslim shops including special discounts at the Muslim shops.

She felt proud to be seen as a Muslim and thankful to Allah for guiding her to this renewed practice.

It is a comfortable boundary which helped you to avoid wrong behavior and helps women to know the limits of their interaction with non-*mahram* men.

There were times at work when she had been made to feel it was unattractive alongside the glamorous women at the office and some

people would express an attitude that the *hijab* was a bit sad as it turned you into a nun like figure.

- Nina had recently embraced Islam when I met her. She found out about *hijab* soon after her conversion to Islam but she did not want to pressure herself while she was still trying to come to terms with her new faith. She was influenced by other women and sometimes felt a bit guilty that she was not wearing it but she wanted to prepare herself psychologically.

When she was ready to make her Islamic identity clearer she chose the start of a new course to make her debut in a head-scarf where she was in a new town with new people. She started by tying the scarf back from her neck and wore it with long western style dresses and skirts with a jacket or a long jumper. Later she began to tie the scarf under her chin. She did not wear Arab or Pakistani clothes at this time although she liked them.

Nina's Scottish non-Muslim family were not at all interested in her dress at first and did not know very much about it. They accepted it and did not try to find out more. Her mother was reassured that Nina had not lost her looks and could still look 'pretty'. They were somewhat uneasy walking out on the streets with her because of reaction from other people but had begun to get used to it. Of her non-Muslim friends, one very close friend remained very supportive and Nina could talk openly with her but she felt 'on a different planet' from some of her other friends.

Nina noticed that wearing *hijab* stopped her from going to unislamic places like pubs and doing unislamic things so that it acted as a kind of protection. There would be no way a *muhajjaba* would feel at ease in a pub.

She felt privileged to be confident in her beliefs and thankful to Allah that she had reached a stage of being strong and comfortable in her Islam. To men outside she was seen as untouchable and this would provide protection from unwanted attention. Passers by in fact did not always notice her and she enjoyed that feeling of anonymity. She did not feel embarrassed or reluctant to go out because of her dress and never regretted wearing it.

She had only received some negative reactions from drunks in the street but no overt negative reaction. She had been told to go back to Africa and called a 'Paki'. She sensed an element of confusion on the part of onlookers when they put her fair complexion and white Scottish appearance with her head-scarf but she noticed that kindly old gentlemen treated her with greater respect than before.

Her employers at the take-away where she was working did not mind her wearing *hijab*. They saw her as being more honest and she was an object of fascination for their daughter. Many of the customers were quite poorly educated as she was working in quite a deprived area and they gave her abuse and picked on her as different. There was such confusion about the meaning of the Islamic head-scarf that some called her a Jew and others said she must have Aids! Some thought she might have alopecia. Nina also had a part-time job working with children in the park and the parents of the children had a good rapport with her and did not seem put off by the *hijab*. She had an ability to be friendly and natural with children. Her experience at college was different because it was a transition period and everything was new. She was aware of side glances and people talking about her. As people got used to her and spoke to her they began to relax and treat her normally. She did not find the lecturers had an attitude problem about Islam, but being regarded as the odd one out helped to toughen her up somewhat.

She was usually treated with indifference or quite coldly in non-Muslim shops but found people did respond to friendliness. Muslim shop owners did not tend to be very friendly to her as a Muslim woman but again responded well to friendliness on her part and then began to ask questions. The larger non-Muslim store staff were generally polite and efficient with everyone so Nina thought it was probably because of company policy but they often showed some curiosity.

At the dentist, she noticed the hygienist had a rather strange attitude and saw her as backward. She was quite rough in her treatment and cold in her manner. She also had a rather patronising attitude from the dentist who seemed to feel sorry for her. She found it was down to herself to consciously always try to compensate for people's ignorance, confusion or hostility by talking straight to people and being open and friendly.

- Another of the Scottish converts who took part in my survey was sister Lubna. By the time of the survey, she was wearing *hijab* all the time as required but had not felt confident to wear it while she was working. She began to wear it after attending an Islamic exhibition where she found out more about Islam and met other convert women who were wearing *hijab*. She felt she would like to express her identity as being married to a Pakistani and being proud of the fact and of being Muslim. Also she felt it was important to set a good example for her children.

She progressed through wearing at times longer western style skirts or Pakistani style shalwar kameez suits and dupatta, the chiffon head-scarf and then went on to wear a more covering scarf. She felt more uneasy if she wore her Islamic dress for part of the time and then did not wear it and began to feel better when she took to wearing it full-time. She preferred the shalwar kameez and scarf.

Her family did not seem to mind although her father was a bit bothered and would ask questions. She would wear western clothes when she was with them to put them at their ease. Some of her family were concerned that she had not thought it through or that it was not her choice or that she was unduly influenced by her husband so she tried to reassure them that it was her own choice.

Her friends were not bothered by her changes in dress and although she might wear a scarf with western clothes while out with them, they would not be alarmed to see her wearing a shalwar kameez.

Lubna knew that the *niqab* was optional and felt those who wore it had the right to their own choice but she herself would have felt uncomfortable wearing it. A friend of hers who did wear *niqab* was friendly towards Lubna but only felt comfortable if Lubna came to visit her and not vice versa.

Lubna did feel somewhat judgmental towards women who did not wear *hijab* because she felt it would be hypocritical not to wear it and felt that women should make the effort. She was treated quite normally by Muslim women who did not wear it and she did not feel a sense of superiority over them. If she saw another woman in *hijab* in the street, she did not usually speak to them unless they addressed her first in case they felt self-conscious.

She did not experience looks or comments in the street that she was aware of and felt that the fact that people would sometimes ask for directions showed that she was not taken as particularly strange. Someone once commented in the lift that they thought she was 'one of those foreign people' and she explained that her husband was Pakistani.

She would not have worn *hijab* at a job interview when she first started to wear *hijab* in case it put them off, unless she was already

known. She thought one could wear it once a job was secured. If the boss was very insistent that employees could not dress like that, she thought a woman could at least wear it to and from work. Lubna wore western dress without a head-scarf when she was working but this was before she learnt more about Islam and began to wear *hijab* full-time. She would have worn it if she were studying on a course, as she did not anticipate it would cause any problems.

She felt she was treated well in both Muslim and non-Muslim shops but she preferred big shops because of her pushchair and she was treated no differently from other customers. She always felt relaxed in the mosque with *hijab* and felt women could be more accepted and involved in an Islamic environment if they did wear it.

She felt comfortable with her *hijab* and no longer self-conscious or worried what others thought of her by the stage of the survey. If people asked about it, she was happy to explain. Where in the past she might try to hide it, she now no longer felt the need. She wanted to make it clear to people that she was wearing it out of her own conviction and not only out of respect for her husband. She did not feel embarrassed or fed up with it and on the whole found that people were mainly indifferent to it. She was not made to feel less intelligent or poorer because of it and actually thought it could make Muslim women look more presentable when going outside.

- Yasmin was a very new Scottish convert when we met. She was just trying to get to grips with the rulings on Islamic dress. She knew already that *hijab* was compulsory.

She was wearing a 'hermes' type scarf worn back off the forehead and she would wear it or not according to mood, place and weather.

Men and non-Muslim women may have difficulty appreciating what a change in appearance is brought about by the simple covering of the hair. When you look at yourself in the mirror it takes so long to get used to this new person looking back at you and still try to look normal. This was why there were days when Yasmin did not feel brave enough to wear a scarf and just felt too conspicuous. Another factor was that Yasmin was somewhat older than many of the other converts and thus with a more established identity.

Yasmin knew her sister would have been disapproving of her wearing Islamic dress because of the image it projects. Her husband did not make an issue of it and did not require her to wear it but she would give him arguments as to why she thought it was required.

Yasmin did not wear *hijab* at work and felt she could not as it was a receptionist job in which she was expected to project a certain image for her company. It would have been seen as strange and at odds with the conventions in that environment. Also Yasmin was not prepared to have to go into lengthy explanations or take on the role of fighting the corner for the right to wear *hijab*, especially as she was having such difficulty with it herself. Yasmin felt it was seen as slightly mad to be religious in the UK. It was not cool to be religious.

Out on the streets, Yasmin would find it easier to wear a scarf and certainly in the mosque because everyone knew she was a Muslim there. She felt warmth and kinship from other women wearing *hijab*. She felt those who wore *niqab* were very brave to withstand being stared at all the time. After her conversion she understood they wore it out of modesty rather than because they had an inflated sense of themselves.

She was very self-conscious and aware of people's reaction outside because the wearing of *hijab* was a big issue for her at that time. She

got curious looks and double takes, some sarcastic comments from passers-by especially young male hecklers and typical comments from builders like 'cheer up darling' but she was also surprised that people asked her for directions. There was a kind of respect which came from the image that was given off by the scarf, like that of a 'wee wifey out on her messages' as she put it.

From women passers-by she noticed warmth or indifference but she was aware that her own thoughts were interfering with her perceptions.

She thought some Muslim women from Muslim countries thought she represented some woman who had 'pinched one of their men' her husband being from North Africa.

She had not noticed different service in shops but was aware of being on show as a Muslim. She tried to be extra polite but due to her face and accent, she was never taken for a foreigner. The *hijab* would curb her behavior in that she would not feel confident in some non-Muslim places. She had not been made to feel less attractive even though before her conversion she set a lot of store by personal appearance. She felt it was no longer important to be seen as attractive by strangers once one had committed to Islam. She could see that once the pressure was taken off to portray a certain image, like to be seen as slim, that was quite a liberation.

Yasmin's story was interesting as it highlights the debate that goes on in the mind of a person who is in the middle of changing their image and very aware of reactions from other people whereas for many long standing *muhajjabat* it had become so much a part of their public identity that they hardly noticed the effect their *hijab* was having.



Whenever a woman came to the mosque to speak to us Muslim women the main point of anxiety was always the *hijab*. Christians especially were used to matters of faith being a private thing which did not have to interfere in one's life in any way. Here was an injunction from their newfound faith, which meant that they had to declare themselves immediately, to friends and family, colleagues and society at large. Uncertain of what people really thought of Islam, aware that there still were many misconceptions about Islam, this public declaration was a matter for trepidation.

Coming out in *hijab* is not like coming out with a new hairstyle. It blows away all the security that a woman has so far built her public image upon. If she was previously proud of her looks or relied upon their effect, then the head-scarf turns her into a plain woman. She can no longer capitalize on her looks or attractive figure as they are hidden from sight. If she felt secure in being defined by her social status then the *hijab* largely obscured that too. She might no longer be treated with respect in stylish shops. If she was proud of her independence or was her own woman, with *hijab* on she now looks like someone's wife even if she is not married.

However, we saw from our surveys that the fear of being scorned or reviled was not borne out in reality. True, as with Fauzia, there were initial raised eyebrows at work, some curiosity and the women felt a need to explain themselves but this was only an initial discomfort before the *hijab* began to feel quite comfortable. As the women found out, the majority of people did not even notice. It is similar to the agonizing of young people about wearing something that they feel is not fashionable or like everyone else. As a matter of fact most people only care what they look like.

b) Old Timers

Wearing the *hijab* for the first time, one can hardly imagine that it will become like second nature. One can hardly imagine that it will become automatic to put it on when male visitors come to the house and that to go out without a scarf would be like stepping out in your nightie but eventually many of the sisters I spoke to for the first section became old hands.

The next group of correspondents were sisters who had been wearing *hijab* for a long time when I interviewed them. They still remembered the progression of their newfound faith and the adaptations of dress that went with it. They had an established identity as identifiable Muslim women. Several of the women in this group were British converts or permanent residents of the UK so they had a lot in common in terms of problems that converts face. Yet they came from quite a variety of backgrounds and so we are able to gain quite a broad picture of life for the *muhajjaba* in Britain.

My correspondent Yasmin is one of two convert sisters from an Irish family. Their family back home thought it was rather sad to hide away one's looks in this way and did not agree with Yasmin's choice of dress. They found it embarrassing if they walked out together at first and did not really understand at all.

Yasmin had lost contact with her non-Muslim friends back home through living over in Scotland and then changing her life in this way.

She always felt proud of her *hijab* and never embarrassed or fed up with it, only a little hot from time to time. She was aware that she might be seen as clumsy by onlookers but never felt disinclined to go out because of *hijab*. Another advantage for her was that Islamic dress stopped one from going against Islam so that it made practice of Islam

easier. In the early stages of wearing *hijab*, she noticed strange looks or curiosity from passers by outside. They showed either disapproval or amusement as if she had gone mad. She no longer noticed any reaction from people however after some time and she was not aware of comments from builders which I asked my correspondents about since they are usually very quick to comment on passers by for a variety of reasons.

Yasmin was a mother at home with small children so she was normally out with her children. Small Muslim shop owners treated her the same as others although she was aware they seemed surprised at her wearing *hijab* as a white woman. She found a friendly attitude in small non-Muslim shops and interest in her as a customer unless the owners were racist in which case they would be hostile and avoids pleasantries. In these cases, Yasmin would not go back. In large non-Muslim stores they were very busy and used to lots of different people so she was treated the same as others.

She was treated with friendliness and interest at the doctor's, dentist and clinic and she was able to talk freely to women practitioners. On the odd occasion she might come across a patronizing attitude which Yasmin felt could also be put down to assumptions made about her Irish accent and the fact that she was young. They sometimes asked questions about Islam, especially pertaining to medical matters. She fitted in well at mother and toddler groups and mothers would freely come up and talk to her.

On a visit to Saudi Arabia she felt that men were apt to stare, probably because of her coloring so that she felt it appropriate to follow the local custom and wear *niqab*.

On her visits home to Ireland she found local people knew her and tended to overlook or ignore the *hijab*. They always assumed she was wearing it for husband.

I asked the correspondents if they been made to feel downtrodden, unattractive or stupid due to *hijab* and Yasmin agreed that sometimes health workers jumped to conclusions about your income because of the head-scarf and would ask intrusive questions or talk down to you. The fact that men ignore women in the street in *hijab* might show that *muhajjabat* are seen as unattractive but in terms of Islamic thinking this is the whole point, to deflect interest in one's looks. Occasionally she felt people tried to make you feel stupid.

- One of the sisters who responded to my survey was born in Scotland but was living in the North East of England. She wore *hijab* as required consisting of a long skirt and long shirt or a long coat with a head-scarf covering the chest. She had a very swift transition to *hijab* after only two days from declaring her Islam. This was because she wore a scarf to pray and thought it would be hypocritical to take it off. She learnt the *fiqh* from her sister who was also a convert to Islam.

Their parents reaction was 'not another one' after they had gone through all this with their other daughter but the attitude mellowed into respect although they were a bit anxious about upsetting the neighbors.

Once this respondent had embraced Islam she moved from Scotland to London to be with her sister and made new Muslim friends some of whom wore *hijab* and some who did not so it was made very easy for her in terms of friends' reaction.

The sister was very active in the *da`wah* (calling to Islam) for example going into schools, speaking to councillors and thought that *niqab* would impede this as it tends to make women seem unapproachable but she recognized the right of any woman to wear it. She did not feel in a position to judge sisters who did not wear *hijab* and was quite aware of how difficult it can be for some sisters.

She knew of some women who thought *hijab* was backward or oppressive. Also there were others who only wore it for cultural reasons not having any idea of the Islamic knowledge behind it or the guidelines on behavior to go with it. The sister was a member of a very small community of Muslims in her small town so they all had a bond with each other and supported each other.

In their conversations, some of the sisters who did not wear *hijab* felt guilty while others thought women who wore it were too strict or even extremist. The sister had received some unfavorable comments in the street 'Why are you wearing a tablecloth on your head?' 'Go back to your own country' (and they did not mean Scotland). 'Why are you dressed like a Paki?' 'Do you speak English?' Also there were some nice comments about how lovely her scarf was. The sister was confident enough to approach people and put them at their ease if she noticed them giving her strange looks. Just by mentioning the weather, one could change a person's attitude completely. The sister wanted to make it known that she was British as she thought it was good for the promotion of Islam and was aware that unfair as it was, white Muslims had an easier time than black or Asian Muslims.

The sister regarded her *hijab* as a part of her. It was her protection and security and she was very aware that whenever she was out she was representing Muslim women and so was careful to watch her behavior. She was always getting questions about *hijab* which were as common as questions on cutting the hands of thieves and she was always ready to explain and reach out to people.

- Fatimah was a British Sudanese sister living in London at the time of the survey who wore *hijab* full time as required. She wore a scarf and a one piece *jilbab*.

Her decision to wear *hijab* came in her late teens along with a deepening of her understanding of her religion and she learnt about *hijab* from her parents and from books and lectures so her mother was very pleased when she started to put it on. Fatimah's friends mostly wore *hijab* also so she felt very much part of the group.

She did not wear *niqab* herself but understood it to be commendable in Islam and an act of worship. However, she did not consider it to be compulsory.

When she came across a Muslim sister who did not wear *hijab* she would pray for their guidance. Fatimah was aware of two groups of *muhajjabat*; those who wear it out of religious conviction and as an act of worship and those who are following their cultural tradition without any awareness of the implications.

There was definitely a barrier between *muhajjabat* and people outside according to Fatimah but once people got to know you they would begin to relax. However, because of the barrier people outside would probably never be as close or open as they would with others.

The main problem Fatimah had in the street was people assuming she could not speak English.

People at work did not make any comment to her but people at her college stared at her and did not know what to say. She was made to feel very welcome at the mosque or at Islamic gatherings.

Fatimah was not aware of being treated differently because of her *hijab* in shops although Muslim shop keepers were usually more friendly and everything at the doctors or on public transport was normal. At leisure centres, she felt an object of curiosity.

Her main motivation is to please Allah and she wears *hijab* as an act of worship so it is an integral part of her faith.

She felt that wearing *hijab* she had sometimes been regarded from outside as less attractive, more downtrodden and lower in status but the strength of her conviction made her over-ride these factors. She did not find that people asked questions about *hijab* and did not feel the need to explain about it.

- My correspondent Sara was a convert from a Scottish family and lived in England. She wore baggy European style clothes such as trousers and a long jumper with her head-scarf which was usually a flower print. Within a few weeks of embracing Islam she had made the commitment to wear *hijab* all the time as she thought it was not good to try and wear it here and there and then take it off. This was despite the fears of her parents whose initial reaction to the head-scarf was considerable shock. Sara also wanted to show her family and friends that she was serious about being a Muslim so that she even wore it to a family funeral.

The *hijab* was a source of embarrassment and anxiety for her parents at first as they were worried what neighbors and friends might think. They also feared that Sara's background and high educational achievements were not being reflected by her dress, which was reminiscent of European peasants. Sara's friends accepted her choice but as she developed in her Islam, she began to make more Muslim friends and gradually lost touch with old friends. She received support from Muslim friends who also wore *hijab* and from her husband who was very positive about it. After some time Sara's family came to terms with her image and respected the rules of *hijab*, for example waiting for her to put it on before taking photos.

Sara did not wear *niqab* and felt it was a choice made with family and one's own understanding. She felt it was not the same as the significance of wearing *hijab* or not as an indicator of faith. She felt

that *hijab* shows the world you are a practising Muslim and she felt close to other women in *hijab*. She feels there is an opinion amongst some younger women that you have not arrived as a Muslim until you wear *niqab*.

She would smile and say salaam to fellow *muhajjabat* outside and some would smile back but others would look bewildered that a stranger was talking to them.

She thought that some British Pakistanis did not think they had to wear *hijab* because it was for Arabs and would be very friendly to Sara assuming she was an Arab or married to an Arab. Some younger women could get a bit giggly that they had seen a white Muslim. The only place where Sara experienced hostility from non-*hijab* wearing women was in Turkey, her husband's country.

Sara did not have any nasty experiences outside. She would mainly be aware of being stared at by other Muslims because of her color and because she often rode a bicycle. In fact, non-Muslims were very friendly talking to her about their Muslim friends and asking questions about Islam.

Sara was well accepted at work and felt her employers at an FE college were quite pleased to have her there as she showed their good equal opportunity credentials. Some of the co-workers modified their language and conversation when she was around treating her a bit like a nun. On the whole people were polite and somewhat curious but kept their distance.

On her teaching training assignment, Sara observed a mixed reaction with some friendliness and some suspicion. There were some issues at the school as parents of the Muslim girls had been having disagreements with the teachers about sports and music and the

teachers seemed to transfer their annoyance onto Sara as a representative of a faith and this undermined their confidence in her as a teacher.

Sara was always treated fine by women at the mosque. However, if she approached a Muslim man at the mosque with a query they felt an obligation to ignore women at the mosque even though they were quite happy to speak to women outside. She said there is a tendency for some Muslim men to treat women wearing *hijab* as inferior to those who do not wear it as if *muhajjabat* are passive creatures who need to be directed.

Sara did not like the attitude of some of the smaller clothes shops and the way she was treated as a customer in *hijab* but this is a common complaint from women in general that the staff in some shops have a tendency to treat with disdain anyone over a size ten. On the whole a friendly attitude was the key to a friendly manner on the part of the shop staff. She had a mixed reaction in the small Muslim shops and did not think there was any advantage or disadvantage in wearing *hijab* as far as they were concerned.

Sara felt proud of her *hijab* and liked the way people kept a respectful distance and did not try to flatter her or be over friendly. One advantage which might seem paradoxical to non-Muslims is that it made her more free in her behavior and she felt that when wearing *hijab* she was free to take control of situations and not be obliged to comply with other people's standards.

Sara has had experience of 'modern Turks' having a very low opinion of *muhajjabat* and this is difficult but Sara has an excellent relationship with her in-laws and always tried to make the most of her visits.

- A sister from a Muslim Pakistani family was living in a small town in Scotland at the time of the survey. With her growing interest in learning about Islam more deeply her dress modified from jeans and a 'hermes' type scarf to wearing a long coat even when serving in her shop, to a full-length Arabic *jilbab* and a larger scarf. She admired the beauty of other women's dress and saw the *hijab* as a blessing from Allah. She gained extra confidence from knowing that she was obeying the command of Allah and trusted that nothing negative would come from the wearing of *hijab*. Often influence to wear *hijab* comes from other sisters within the family and this was the case for this correspondent. Also through her reading and attending lectures she became in no doubt that *hijab* was a requirement. Her husband accepted her decision and the gradual adaptation of her clothes.

Once she had made her decision the sister took it as a matter of course and was not concerned about the reactions of neighbors or friends. She knew she was doing the right thing by her religion. The fact that she was part of the only Muslim family in a small village made it easier to do things on her own terms. Her family would have preferred her form of *hijab* to be more in line with their own Pakistani tradition but they got used to it.

When visiting Saudi Arabia as a pilgrim the sister was very impressed with the local women covering their faces. She would have felt very strange there to go about with her face uncovered. She never had a bad attitude from women wearing *niqab* back home.

When she saw Muslim women without *hijab* she assumed they were lacking in knowledge about Islam. If they knew about it and still did not wear it the sister found that disappointing.

Since local shopkeepers, medical staff and neighborhood people knew her she did not have any comments or problems. If she were ever badly treated, she would not put it down to her *hijab* but the people's own problems. As it happened, she did not notice anything negative.

- Fridah is part of the growing new generation of grown up Muslim children who have one or both parents who converted to Islam. This is an interesting group to compare with converts and those Muslims who come from generations of Muslim families. Because of their color, they are sometimes taken as converts but gradually as the British Muslim community matures and develops the wider society will start to adjust to the presence of this section of the Muslim community who are born into a Muslim family and yet have a significant number of non-Muslim relatives and thus a stronger bond with the wider society.

Fridah was born in Scotland. Her father was originally from Kashmir and her mother is a Scottish convert. She wore *hijab* all the time as required, either western style with the scarf or shalwar kameez and scarf. She started wearing it all the time after she left school. She was aware of the Islamic *fiqh* regarding *hijab* from her parents, from books and from lectures. Her family were positive and happy that she was wearing *hijab*, especially with her mother being a *muhajjabah* herself. As regards her friends, the non-Muslims would ask questions and those Muslims who did not wear it asked whether her parents had forced her to wear it.

Fridah did not wear *niqab* and did not know any women who did. She felt it was up to those who wore it to do so if they wanted to but she personally felt it was going too far.

Her opinion of those who did not wear *hijab* would depend on their reasons. She did not feel in a position to judge if they did not

have the confidence because she could really identify with those fears as she had had to get over them herself. If a Muslim woman argues that they did not believe they had to wear *hijab*, Fridah did not agree with this opinion and sometimes thought it was an excuse.

She noticed that some *muhajjabat* smiled at her in the street and public places even if she did not know them. Women who did not wear *hijab* would sometimes express a wish to wear it like Fridah and others would pity her. She did not remember having any comments from onlookers in the street or out in public places but a variety of significant looks from a smile to amazement to stares especially if she was with a large group of *muhajjabat*.

Fridah was a student at the time of the survey and everyone she met at university had known her with *hijab* all along so they accepted her as she was.

At the mosque and at Islamic gatherings she would usually be well accepted by people who knew her, but had experienced some unfavorable looks especially from older people if she was wearing western clothes, even if she was wearing a head-scarf.

When Fridah went out for leisure activities, she noticed some people thought it was weird if a woman dressed in this way and yet could relax and have fun.

She did not feel she was treated differently on public transport or in large stores or non-Muslim shops.

Fridah is used to her *hijab* now and felt it sometimes gave her more confidence. She feels when wearing *hijab* that she is representing Muslims and is conscious that other people might judge her behavior as something they think is wrong. She usually explains and discusses *hijab* with people she knows.

● A Scottish convert who also wears *hijab* all the time as required responded to my survey. She started with her own customized version of Islamic dress after being convinced by Islamic lectures and then gradually moved on to a shalwar kameez most of the time. Her family were puzzled and although they still saw it as unnecessary, they eventually accepted it. The sister's husband was pleased as were her Muslim friends even those who were not wearing it themselves. Her non-Muslim friends seemed more ready to accept her new image than her family. She did not wear *niqab* as she did not think it was an essential part of Islamic dress but she felt alright about women who did wear it, that it was their choice. She felt sad about women who did not wear *hijab* and was very encouraged when other Muslim women wore it. Some women who wore *niqab* would be a bit pushy towards her but they were happy that at least she was wearing *hijab*. Strangers were curious about it and some Muslim sisters would smile at her. She was treated respectfully by those Muslim women who did not wear *hijab* and some wished they could be stronger about it.

Out in the streets, the sister had some strange looks and comments like 'are you a nun?' or 'Paki lover' or 'you got a saer heed hen?' Muslim women she did not know were very happy and would make a point of coming over especially to greet her. In Islamic gatherings she was usually treated with respect and some curiosity but once the barriers were broken down she was treated on the same terms as others.

Again, reactions from health workers and teachers at her children's school were characterized by curiosity and friendliness and the sister did not experience any noticeable hostility.

She felt good and comfortable in her *hijab* and did not feel it restricted her activities. She was not made to feel less presentable and

only more downtrodden and of lower status in the past but not after that. From time to time, she would answer questions about *hijab*.

The sister felt that the reactions from onlookers and strangers were difficult to judge as Glasgow had a distinctive sense of humor and what might be given as a cheeky but well-meaning comment there might be termed as racist elsewhere in the UK. In any case, the sister had her own sense of humor and generally took the comments in good part.

- Another resident of Glasgow was also a Scottish convert called Louise. She wore *hijab* consisting of a full-length dress or skirt and a scarf. She started to wear it after listening to a lecture and reading and experienced pressure from other Muslim women who made her feel awkward if she did not wear it. She started with a scarf tied at the back of her head and it gradually made its way forward until she felt confident to wear it fully covering the head and neck. She became aware of Islamic *fiqh* regarding dress from books, lectures and discussions with other Muslims.

Louise had a sympathetic reaction from her family to her decision and came to see it was important to her, to the extent that they would give her scarves as presents and be sensitive about letting her know if non-*mahram* men were around.

Though she did not use *niqab* because she deemed it was unnecessary, she had no problem with those who wore it or those who did not wear *hijab* at all.

She was not sure how *niqab* wearing women regarded her. Other women who wore *hijab* would often greet her outside. There were differing reactions from those who did not wear *hijab*. Some were interested in her choice, others really negative and others were embarrassed and would try to justify themselves.

Louise had both negative and positive experiences out on the streets. Children and older people would smile and converse while others threw cans or pulled at her scarf.

When she was working her boss and co-workers used humor or teasing to get over their discomfort with her new look but got used to it. At university, staff and students seemed quite indifferent. She was warmly received at the mosque and Islamic gatherings.

When at the doctor's there would sometimes be blank looks when Louise answered to her name and was dressed in this way or she would be spoken to as if she did not know English very well. The teachers at her children's school did not seem to treat her differently. Also, she noticed a marked improvement amongst bus/train drivers and taxi drivers in their attitude towards Muslim women.

Louise usually felt fine and positive about her *hijab* though sometimes out of place in the university lecture theatre. She did feel able to answer questions about it. She agreed that it was true that *hijab* helped to curb behavior at times and there had been times when she had been made to feel less attractive, more downtrodden and of lower status because of her *hijab*.

● Ruqayyah is an English convert living in Hull, a prolific Muslim writer who has contributed to the *hijab* debate as we saw in the discussion in 'Q News'. Since she had quite a high profile in the UK Muslim community, her comments usually generated more interest and debate. She wore *hijab* nearly all the time except when shopping on her motor bike. At various times she has worn a variety of pieces depending on the situation: trousers, long skirts with long tops, shalwar kameez, a long dress and an Arabic *jilbab*. Her sources of information on *fiqh* of Islamic dress was mainly the Egyptian mufti Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi whose opinion is widely respected in the

western and Muslim world. There were also plenty of other texts which dealt with the issue of the rules of *hijab*. Ruqayyah's family were embarrassed at first but finally more or less accepted it but they still felt as though she was dressing up. Her husband did not comment on her choice of dress and his own family and the wives of his friends did not wear *hijab*, only occasionally the dupatta chiffon piece with a shalwar kameez.

Ruqayyah did not use the *niqab* and nor did she think it was part of Islam which was why she felt those who did not wear it were very sensible and she thinks those who do were making unnecessary difficulties for other Muslim women. She certainly felt it was not required and had experienced an attitude of superiority on occasions from *niqab* wearing women. She was of the opinion that the decision to wear *hijab* was a personal one and should not be forced. She equates it with the decision for Muslim men whether or not to have beards.

She did not know what *niqab* wearers thought of her but had an idea they thought they were right and she was wrong. Those women who did not wear *hijab* at all treated her well.

Out in the streets she had often been taken for a holy sister by non-Muslims and had often been asked for money by beggars.

At work, her boss and co-workers did not really like Islamic dress and thought it gave a 'holier than thou' impression which is very unpopular with English people.

She did not experience any problems being accepted at Muslim gatherings. Regarding negative attitudes from outside by non-Muslims, she sees it as something which is not normally directed towards English converts. She thought it was rather a build up of

resentment which came from some non-Muslims bad experience of dealing with Pakistani/Bangladeshi Muslims and what Ruqayyah called 'shifty' business practices of some sections of the community as well as anti-social behavior in schools on the part of Muslims which she had witnessed during her time as a teacher.

Ruqayyah had no problem with the health service or out shopping in any kind of shop. She was not afraid of discrimination being a 'tough old English bird' as she called herself. She felt fine about *hijab* except in very hot weather and it did make her check her behavior outside. She did not feel the need to answer questions on it. She had never been made to feel downtrodden or of lower status because of its being unattractive. On the contrary, she felt it made her look better. The scarves were pretty and could hide one's double chin.

● Another long established convert who took part in my survey was Batool who comes from Ireland but had lived in England for many years. She had been very active in the Muslim community throughout her career especially in support of converts. Her work has given her a broad experience of *hijab* traumas, *hijab* dilemmas and the tendency of *hijab* to become central to the Muslim discourse in Britain. She wore *hijab* all the time as required and dressed according to her own European tradition favouring suits, long skirts and jackets and a head-scarf sometimes teamed with a hat.

The evolution of her dress began when she was introduced to get married. She was wearing *hijab* because she felt it was required and had started off with Arab style clothes such as *jilbabs* as they were given as presents. However, she was aware that this style of dress was not her own conscious choice. She had been aware of the *fiqh* of Islamic dress from books and lectures but it took her a long time to realize that one can adapt and modify one's dress within Islamic

guidelines yet in line with one's own culture. She began to think that western converts do not necessarily have to adopt the Arabic *jilbab* or Pakistani shalwar kameez to be properly dressed. Batool's family were not very happy with her dress at first seeing it as old-fashioned and peasantish. They encouraged her to wear something in keeping with her own culture. Batool's husband never pressured her to wear *hijab* but he respected it while acknowledging that other fundamental Islamic principles were far more important to be worrying about. Batool believed that over-insistence on correct dress should not get in the way of projecting Islam to non-Muslims, especially family and communicating all its wonderful principles and concepts. Naturally, concerns like this are closer to convert's hearts, especially if they have a supportive family and this is one reason why they like to have as few barriers as possible to good relations with them.

Batool did not wear *niqab* and said it was their business if they wanted to wear it or not as the case may be. Personally, Batool preferred to be able to see who she was talking to. She had the same feeling about a woman's choice whether or not to wear *hijab*. She believed it was their own choice.

She did not know how women in *niqab* regarded her but had an inkling they did not rate you very highly if you did not wear it.

Hijab wearers often greeted her with a smile outside. It was difficult to fathom how non-*hijab* wearers regarded her as they were hard to identify as Muslims outside.

Out and about Batool had experienced favourable and unfavorable responses both smiles and greetings, as well as rudeness. It did not bother her at all.

Working within an Islamic environment meant that Batool found no problems with wearing Islamic dress at work.

When she was a student, she got the feeling that teachers and colleagues found her unapproachable and thought she did not speak English. This was at that time she was wearing Arab style dress. Once she began to adjust her dress to her own preferences, they began to respond to her warm personality and found her more approachable.

She was always well received at Muslim gatherings and noticed from observing different women that they could dress smartly and still be decent and modest.

She was assertive at the doctor's and clinic so that workers did not make false assumptions about her because of her dress.

At her diet club she felt Muslim women were regarded with surprise at first but then became integrated into the group because of their shared interest and goals.

Batool found other parents at her children's school quite reserved because of the part of England they were living in and it took them a while to respond to her but she put that down to the nature of village life.

One advantage of travelling on public transport as a *muhajjabah*, she pointed out, was that people hesitated to sit next to her so she had the seats to herself until it got busy.

Hijab has been so much part of her life for so long that Batool is hardly aware of it any more but the over-riding feeling is one of confidence. It does not restrict her from saying and doing what she feels strongly about.

She has been made to feel more downtrodden and of lower status actually by Muslim men who tend to skirt around her 'as if she was some kind of disease in their midst.' She thinks this is just a question

of manners that some men have to look into but from her side she expects to be able to function in society without being treated as a non-entity. Although Batool answered *hijab* questions readily in the past, she tends to dodge them these days and she has grown tired of the issue.

- Maryam was a convert who came from a Guyanan family and lived in London at the time of the survey. She wore *jilbab* and her *hijab* all the time as required. Her dress progressed from long, loose garments to the addition of an over garment and scarf followed by the *niqab*.

She learnt about the *fiqh* of Islamic dress from books, tapes and other Muslim women. Her family at first told her she did not need to dress like that and could wear long skirts and baggy jumpers.

When Maryam first became Muslim all her old non-Muslim friends drifted away and she made Muslim friends.

Although she covered her face with *niqab* for some time, eventually she stopped wearing it because of people's comments. After that, when she saw other women in *niqab* she would wish she could get back the confidence to wear it. Yet since she knew it was not compulsory her conscience did not trouble her. When she saw Muslim women who did not wear *hijab* she remembered the stages she had gone through and assumed they must be going through the same kind of progression.

Women who wore *niqab* treated her like any other sister. She had also found women in the street friendly and kind and had not noticed hostility from Muslims who did not wear *hijab*. She had some silly comments about her dress in the street like 'Batman' and some very offensive ones like 'scum' or 'filth.'

At Islamic gatherings she was welcomed as part of the group. She did not notice anything unusual about the attitude of health workers but found some non-Muslim shop staff patronizing whilst Muslim shop keepers were friendlier towards her.

On public transport, she just got looks but that never stopped her wearing *hijab*.

She felt at ease with her choice of dress and would not have wanted to go back to long skirts and baggy jumpers like she wore at first, her current style being more suitable and tailor made as a form of Muslim dress.

She was prepared to answer questions from old friends who saw her in the street.

- There was another Yasmin amongst my correspondents, also a Scottish convert to Islam of long standing. When I met her, she had been wearing *hijab* for many years and her two daughters also wore it. Their responses appear later in the section about young people.

Yasmin wore the *hijab* all the time as required, usually a large white scarf with western style trousers and a long top. When she first became Muslim, she did not wear it but on having her first baby she made the decision to wear it all the time after having a bit of half and half experimentation with it before that. She knew it was the right thing to do and it marked an important turning point in her life. She found out about the *fiqh* regarding Islamic dress from books, other Muslim sisters and her husband. Initially her family thought it was rather frumpy and did not like it but they gradually got used to it and eventually fully accepted it.

She did not think the *niqab* was necessary and sometimes felt women who wore it looked down upon those who did not but she

accepted their interpretation of the rulings. She would probably wear it herself in Saudi Arabia since it is the norm there but generally felt it was disempowering for women.

Although she felt that Muslim women who did not wear *hijab* were letting the side down a bit, she thought she would have to look at their backgrounds to fully understand their reasons. She has found that some have been inspired by her to wear it. She felt that if one was praying and fasting then one should follow Islamic *shari`ah* in this regard too and wear *hijab*.

In the street, she used to feel self-conscious but not any more. People do notice her color and she has had comments such as 'white Paki'. Although reactions were bad at first, things were a lot better at the time of the survey and most people reacted to her with indifference. There seemed to be a class difference in reactions with people from a less educated background being more vocal with their comments. She found builders would stare and watch Yasmin and her children trying to make them out but her children had the confidence to answer back to any nasty comments.

She had had no problems at work and people were quite curious and asked for information. *Hijab* did not prove to be a problem when Yasmin was working in their shop or at the hospital. She said patients coming round after an operation thought they had died and entered the company of angels upon seeing Yasmin by the bed-side in her white scarf.

Hijab is obviously taken for-granted at Islamic gatherings but Yasmin has felt that there has been a lack of fellow feeling from some Muslim sisters in her experience and some did not reply to her greetings.

Yasmin was treated somewhat dismissively by health workers despite her being a health worker herself and they were surprised that she could speak up for herself. They would also get her name wrong.

She found that *hijab* could be a barrier in liaising with her children's school especially as she is a rather reserved person and in this context, *hijab* could put people off and inhibit relaxed conversation.

As regards leisure activities, it actually gave her the freedom to be able to take part.

Yasmin felt proud of her *hijab* and in control of situations. She pointed out that it can be used to advantage if she felt the need to be retiring. Sometimes she had been made to feel less attractive or intelligent because of her *hijab* and possibly more downtrodden but conversely she had often been afforded higher status because of it.

- `A'ishah was a convert from a British Jamaican family and was living in London. She had been a student in Scotland and so was able to compare experiences.

She wore *jilbabs* on occasions and at other times loose skirts and blouses with different types of head-scarf. She had learnt about the *fiqh* of *hijab* from books and lectures and was wearing it full-time as required.

At first, her family thought the *hijab* made her look old and were worried that she would suffer discrimination and would find it difficult to get a job. The donning of *hijab* tends to set off fears about discrimination which over-ride racial factors because parents of white converts had the same fears about their daughters putting themselves outside the norms of society and possibly making themselves unemployable or at a social and economic disadvantage.

However, `A'isha parents had come to terms with her dress and at the time of the survey they did not say anything. When `A'ishah adapted her dress to Islamic standards, she found that she drifted away from her non-Muslim friends and made friends with other *muhajjabat*. If she did meet new non-Muslims after that they accepted her as she was.

`A'ishah did not wear *niqab* and did not feel any differently towards *munaqqabat* than *muhajjabat*. She was interested however in why they were wearing it. She believed it was not necessary in Islamic law and was their own choice. However if she came across a Muslim women who was not wearing *hijab* it would make her sad and concerned and she would take it upon herself to advise and encourage them. Similarly, if `A'ishah knew that a woman was only wearing *hijab* out of custom and habit, she would think it a cause for concern but she was very happy if they were doing it because they had understood Islam.

Women who wore *niqab* were sometimes unfriendly she had noticed and gave the impression that they thought she was not as good as them but this attitude varied from person to person and some were very nice.

She also found a mixed reaction when passing fellow *muhajjabat* in the street. Whilst some would smile and say *salaam* others would ignore her or look scornfully. It seemed to be older Asian women who failed to register her as a fellow Muslim. From other respondents reports it seems that the older women only felt this type of solidarity with women from their own community and did not show the pleasure in seeing converts that one might get from many Arab sisters.

The only comments `A'ishah had in the street regarding her appearance were banal things like, 'Are you hot?' or 'Are you an Arab?'

There was no problem at work as `A'ishah was working in an Islamic environment at the time where they would have been very annoyed if she did not wear *hijab*.

People tended to receive her with indifference at the mosque but were very welcoming at Islamic gatherings. Mosques in London are highly diverse with women coming from literally every background in the Muslim world and there are strangers and newcomers coming and going all the time. Again there was no difference in attitude she felt amongst health workers or in big stores and on public transport but small Muslim shops were more friendly.

`A'ishah felt comfortable and secure in her *hijab* and by this stage did not want it to become too much of an issue as it is only one of the many Islamic requirements. She did not answer questions about it very often. Sometimes she had been made to feel unattractive because of it.



It was interesting to see how these sisters had managed to develop their Islamic image, which had adapted to British society. Many of them had customized clothes that can be bought in Britain to fit the Islamic requirements for *hijab*. Nearly all understood *hijab* to mean mainly the head-scarf and it was the idea of covering the hair which marked them out most clearly.

We saw that there was a degree of abuse, along the same lines as dark-skinned people receive when being racially abused usually by young or uneducated people.

Some of our correspondents like the sister from the north east, also Sara and Nina who had just started wearing *hijab* at the time of the survey all felt the obligation to reach out and be friendly to people.

They took it as their responsibility to anticipate people's uneasy feelings about approaching someone in *hijab*.

The correspondents found that over time, they came to be known and respected for their way of dress and the picture on the whole was very positive. Medical staff, shop staff, public workers and colleagues all seemed to be able to deal with them without too much problem.

One of the consequences of getting involved in the Muslim community and developing one's faith meant that over time the women built up a circle of like minded friends. Many reported a gradual drifting away from old friends, which is the case for anyone who undergoes a dramatic change in lifestyle. When people marry, they very often move away from old single friends and make friends with other couples.

The pressure of discrimination or alienation from society was eased by the fact that many of these women were moving within an Islamic environment much of the time. Batool, for example worked for an Islamic institution. Mothers like Yasmin were in their own home environment much of the time. Others were involved in community work with social life centred around the mosque and Islamic gatherings.

Where Islamic dress might be a problem is when a Muslim woman is trying to operate in a non-Muslim environment but our correspondents who worked met with respect most of the time. Many of them favoured the anonymity of the large stores whose staff were trained in dealing with a diverse range of people. Overall, our correspondents found that some people were distant but very few expressed open hostility.

I wanted to compare the experience of women from Muslim countries who had come to the UK and see how they were perceived

to ascertain whether problems were greater than for those born and raised in Britain, especially those from white families. How far did negative attitudes to race overlap with those against Islamic dress itself? Would it be easier or more difficult to go about in *hijab* as a woman coming from an established Muslim culture?



`A'ishah lived in Scotland for a few years while I was doing the survey and she came from Turkey. Like many Turkish women, she was light-skinned so that perhaps she may have been assumed to be British convert but she spoke with a distinct foreign accent. She was a full-time *muhajjabah* favoring plain clothes without design and usually wearing a Turkish style coat, which reached the ankles. `A'ishah had begun to wear *hijab* at high-school after reading books about Islam and talking to practising sisters. She felt the need to look and feel more Islamic and to show the importance of proper Islamic dress. Her style of dress remained constant and she did not have any modification in her *hijab*.

She fully understood the Qur'an and Sunnah rulings on Islamic dress. Although her mother accepted her choice, her father did not understand or like it. He was afraid that she might become too involved in *da`wah* and openly Islamic whilst other members of the family who were aware of Islamic thought were pleased with her decision. Many of her friends did not like the changes she had made in her life so she gradually developed new friendships with like-minded people.

`A'ishah had never worn *niqab* at the time of the interview but she did regard *niqab*-wearing women as being more practising and Islamic. She thought it was right to wear *niqab* because the face is

very precious and should not be seen by just anyone. Regarding her relationship to women who wore *niqab*, they would encourage her or even pressure her to wear it but she did not feel ready.

She herself would not pressure women who did not wear *hijab* because she thought maybe they would start of their own accord. She thought it was all right for the women who did not wear it as long as they held onto their belief in Islam. By contrast, she had some very angry reactions from women who did not wear *hijab* towards her decision whilst others had no adverse reaction and though it acceptable. She did not feel any pressure to wear it from her husband although she got the feeling that he was pleased and proud that she had chosen to wear it.

`A'ishah felt proud of her *hijab* too, also independent. She had never felt she did not want to wear it. Occasionally she felt some hostility from passers-by in the street but mainly looks and had never suffered verbal abuse from builders.

She felt fellow feeling with other women wearing *hijab* and they would often smile at her. Malaysian sisters were especially friendly even if they did not know her but she did not get any response from local Pakistani Muslim women in the street who on the whole, did not seem to feel any fellow feeling with her in that they often did not return her *salams*. If she were out with her children, she would get more favourable attention from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. She followed the principle according to the Prophet (peace be upon him) that Muslims should greet other Muslims they know and those they do not know (this applying to those of the same gender as oneself). Muslims believe that the angels respond to their greeting if a person does not.

`A'ishah had also had bad reactions in Turkey in some public places when she worked in a shop and at a school. There was a fair bit of hostility on the part of teachers and customers. In Britain, she was well treated in small Muslim shops with no special treatment and found herself treated as well as other customers in non-Muslim shops. She felt more comfortable going to the bigger shops and again did not feel she was treated differently from others.

She was treated well by health service workers and a few nurses were more friendly than others but `A'ishah believed you could not attribute everything to the *hijab*. She felt that people without *hijab* had the same mixed experience of public workers.

At local mother and toddler groups, she found the other Mums did not readily come forward to talk to her and seemed reticent. She herself was a rather shy person and did not feel confident to strike up conversation.

She had occasionally been made to feel less intelligent though this could be put down to attitudes to foreigners in general. Also, she may sometimes have been perceived to be of lower economic status but not in Turkey. She did not feel she had been made to feel unattractive. I often noticed that the dress of women from Muslim countries often looked very well co-ordinated compared with the mix and match efforts prevalent amongst some of the British born Muslims and this made the women appear very elegant and well groomed. It is also the case that some women have an ability to look well turned out in whatever clothes they are wearing and this is the same of non-Islamic dress.

- Sister Fadhila from Malaysia was also spending some time studying in Scotland. She had a similar experience to `A'ishah in that she committed herself more fully to Islam at a young age.

At the time of the survey, she wore patterned and colored scarves covering her hair completely all the time as required and then wore trousers or skirts with long pullovers or tops. On special occasions, she would wear the Malaysian style suits.

Fadhilah was about fourteen when her family were influenced by an Islamic talk and her friends started to pressure her to wear *hijab* as they did. She resisted their pressure at first and asked for evidence and the more they frightened her with *hadith* the more angry and resistant she became.

It was not until she developed her own interest in the Qur'an and became more convinced of the fact that *hijab* was *fard* (compulsory) that she took a decision with a friend to start at the age of sixteen. Her head-scarf graduated from being tied behind her neck to a fully covering head piece covering the chest. By the time, Fadhilah had the complete Islamic dress she had learnt more about Islam and felt more confident in it. She was doing her Ph.D. in Islamic studies at the time of the interview and so had taken her interest to a high level. Her family were not upset or surprised by her decision and her friends treated her the same and did not mock her. There were some who stopped wearing it because their parents did not like it or because it would impede them in sport.

Fadhilah never wore *niqab*. She thought that was extreme and could not recognize women who wore it. She felt it would be restricting and stop you interacting successfully with people. She said it was a personal choice if a woman was not working. Though they would sometimes comment on the color of her clothes, *niqab* wearers were never judgmental or self-righteous towards Fadhilah.

She herself understood the pressures on women who did not wear *hijab* maybe because their husbands disliked it or because of political

pressure but she felt it was all right if they dressed modestly and not in a provocative way. Women without *hijab* treated Fadhilah quite normally.

When she gave salaam to *muhajjabat* in the street in Scotland, she got some responses whilst others seemed to be daydreaming.

She had felt confident and proud of her *hijab* throughout and sure of herself. She was never fed up or embarrassed and believed that if worn smartly, *hijab* could look really good both attractive and decent.

Fadhilah was not usually aware of the reaction of passers-by in the street. She sensed some curiosity but no hostility, which she had experienced during her time in the United States. Builders never laughed at her and she did not recall any remarks except the odd racist comment connected with her *hijab* or calling her 'Chinese' or something like that.

There were no problems with *hijab* in public in Malaysia. She was never patronized in the university Islamic department either there or in Scotland and did not experience any hostility towards *hijab*.

In Scotland, people in small Muslim shops were especially nice to her though this may be partly due to the fact that she was a very friendly person herself. She favoured the large non-Muslim stores and always felt at ease there but put that down to her being quite thick-skinned.

Hijab is so normal in the mosque that no one ever had a problem with her there. Fadhilah felt that because of her confidence in her *hijab* and self-identity she would be just as at home in *hijab* at the cinema as she would in an Islamic lecture.

Fadhilah found doctors quite approving of the Islamic lifestyle in general, for example the ban on alcohol. They tended to be quite

curious and readily asked questions. She was treated well and with respect at the optician and the dentist.

She only had an adverse reaction at the school gates by some uneducated people although other parents were more open. The area they were living in was quite insular so that most parents kept their distance. Occasionally some of the cheeky children in the neighborhood would tease her but she ignored them. She felt confident to explain why she wore *hijab* but less able to deflect racist remarks.

While she blends in Malaysia, in Scotland wearing *hijab* makes you stick out from the crowd. In terms of being made to feel less attractive, she observed a feeling from some in Malaysia that attractive women should not wear *hijab*.

- My correspondent Haifa was also a Ph.D. student and came from Indonesia who was wearing *hijab* all the time as required. She wore long skirts, trousers in winter with long blouses, sweaters or jackets with a head-scarf usually of plain color.

After going through an illness when she was about twenty-two she began to think more seriously about her life and religion. Most of the women in her family dressed modestly but did not use a head-scarf. Haifa read her brother's books on Islam, which made a deep impression on her and raised many questions in her mind. She became disturbed by the evils and problems in society. She had always admired women who wore *hijab*, taking them to be more religious and realized that she had taken in a lot about the significance of *hijab* subconsciously. She began to learn the *fiqh* formally from other students and from books and was inspired by her sister-in-law who was a *muhajjabah*. Haifa's mother was a bit worried about the implications of starting to wear *hijab* for her daughter. Haifa wanted

to prepare herself mentally before she took the big step and she chose a holiday in Thailand to have her first try so that she could get used to it. It did not come as a great shock to her friends who were quite impressed and her mother also took to it although it was a very distinct scarf worn by people to show Islamic adherence rather than the thinner head-covers which may be worn as part of local dress.

Haifa had no antipathy to *munaqqabat* and found them friendly. It is difficult to talk to someone in *niqab* so she would watch the body language and eyes because one could not tell if she was smiling or not.

She understood why some women did not wear *hijab* and could accept it if it was out of ignorance but knew that if it was out of disobedience they would have to bear the responsibility so she would encourage them to wear it.

When she met a *muhajjabah* in the street in Scotland, they would exchange smiles as a rule and she was treated well at Islamic gatherings by those women who wore *hijab* out of conviction. The ones who wore it for custom only treated her like a stranger and would stay in their national groups.

If women who did not wear *hijab* understood Islam they treated her well.

She was shown respect from non-Muslims in the street especially older people and only occasional nasty incidents occurred. A lady once shouted 'Paki' to her out of a car. She kept staring at them and they said 'what a silly hat.'

It is easy to wear *hijab* in a university environment in her opinion but one has to make the effort to show one's personality in order not to be isolated. Her colleagues were used to her declining invitations to the pub and did not take it badly. They were actually quite protective

of her when out and about. She never found her dress to be a disadvantage on her course.

She felt very comfortable at the mosque because people there were open minded and the mosque she went to pray in was not nationality based and welcomed worshipers on an equal footing.

Haifa found no problems with medical staff or in shops and on public transport and found smiling was the key to being treated well. She thought that she received better treatment than others in the small Muslim shops and was treated as a favourite customer.

She was very pleased to have made the decision to wear *hijab* and never hesitated once she had put it on. She was confident in it. She would avoid places where the non-Muslims gather to have fun such as football matches and big festivals because she would fear being targeted as a foreigner because of her race and not because of the *hijab* itself.

Inevitably wearing *hijab* meant one had less interest from men than other women but commitment to *hijab* meant also refraining from flirting so since she felt she was probably ignored out of respect her self-esteem remained high. She was not made to feel down-trodden mainly being in a university situation where people knew her situation. It could however impact on one's economic status because of the possible narrowing of job prospects, employers perhaps being more likely to employ non-practising Muslims

● Rayan from Oman was also studying in Scotland and wore *hijab* full time. When growing up she attended an international school in India and did not receive any Islamic education. It was on her return to Oman that she received convincing teachings on Islam and the importance of *hijab*. One of her teachers had a very good approach to

encouraging the young girls to wear their *hijab* and Rayan was personally convinced of its necessity.

She had no difficulty once she had decided to wear *hijab* except occasional forgetfulness and it was a little awkward to wear *hijab* in front of her cousins when before she had treated them like *mahram* members of the family.

She sometimes wore *niqab* but felt it was very strange in the West and may put people off Islam. She had never been aware of pressure from *munaqqabat* that she should wear the face-cover and felt they did not have a sense of superiority. Rayan was actually quite troubled to see Muslim women without *hijab* unless they were new converts. She could not really understand why some women neglected it. She feels the need to give them advice but only if they would accept it. Some of the women who did not wear *hijab* thought she was extreme to wear it but on the whole they respected her. Some Omanis expressed surprise that she had the confidence to wear it in the West.

When Rayan became more aware of her religion and *hijab* as a youngster her family were influenced in the same way and her mother also began to wear *hijab*. Her father thought she was a little young at first but when he became convinced of the arguments he supported her. Also some of her friends thought she was young to wear *hijab* but they accepted her and some of them followed her example.

Rayan only remembers the bad incidents that occurred in the street because she was once spat at from a car and suffered teasing from builders. But this is not the general picture because she felt she was treated with respect by men in Scotland and people in general.

I noticed that many of my correspondents from overseas had very gracious manners and a natural modesty which comes from growing up in Islam which people tend to respond well to.

At her college Rayan's teachers were not patronizing and treated her the same as others. The other students on the course kept their distance on the whole though a few of them were friendly. She received normal service in shops usually and only the occasional bad tempered shop assistant and she had no negative incidents at doctors, dentists and clinics.

Rayan had a clear Islamic identity reflected in her *hijab*. She believes the *hijab* protects her and she never felt afraid to wear it. She thought that Islamic dress was not always recognized as being distinctly Islamic in the West as people tended to confuse religions.

The *hijab* stopped her from going to inappropriate places. She used to go to the cinema but felt out of place there in her *hijab* and thought people felt it was strange.

She is quite at home at Islamic gatherings and *hijab* gave one a sense of belonging in these settings

The *hijab* set clear boundaries between the genders, which is especially useful when people are single.

- It seems that it was more taken for-granted that these sisters would dress the way they did because their appearance and accent marked them out as coming from a Muslim country.

Those who came to wear *hijab* at quite a young age had developed their religious understanding so that by the time of their stay in the UK they were at ease in their *hijab*. None of them reported very negative reactions in the UK and the picture in Scotland seemed to be an atmosphere of respect.

Generally, feelings about *hijab* were also positive for both groups of these long-term *muhajjabat*. There was an evident sense of pride in

being true to their faith and nobody felt in any way restricted by their choice of dress. On the contrary, they felt *hijab* was liberating and only stopped you going to places, which would be bad for your faith anyway.

c) Evolution of *Hijab*

For the majority of women, *hijab* evolves over time to become more covering. There were one or two of my correspondents who had a re-think about *hijab* and modified it to look less foreign or to make it easier to operate in a non-Muslim environment. In this section, we will take up a few of the examples from our survey to highlight how modification of dress went hand in hand with a choosing of Islam as a way of life.

For converts like Nina we saw that she, like many of the others felt so much the importance of getting it right because they wanted to make a positive impression. They saw the *hijab* as a means to convey to the world who they were and what motivated them in life. Nina had let the belief settle in her heart and wanted time for mental preparation before starting to dress like a Muslim. It must not be forgotten that not all converts have instant certainty. For many the choice of Islam is very much a private issue at first. There are lots of internal struggles with the ideas of Islam before one is finally convinced and it takes great strength of character and a high degree of certainty to be ready to show one's new look to the world from the start. Some of the converts like our sister from the North East were lucky enough to have this certainty from the start and the readiness to be open about Islam early on. She had the advantage of having her Muslim sister as a role model who presumably had eased the concerns of family and friends. Nina was aware of the need to modify her clothes to be more modest before

wearing the head-scarf. Others like Carol and Yasmin went straight to the head-scarf seeing this as the key element of Islamic dress. This is what made them self-conscious having been used to going about with hair uncovered all their lives. The feeling is understandable because in the West one is actually drawing attention by wearing a head-scarf especially as a white woman, even though it might disguise one's attractiveness. The benefit of *hijab* under normal Islamic circumstances is that it allows the women to blend in. So, the feeling of self-consciousness is good because it is a reflection of one's inner modesty.

Women may start with a light scarf or a western style scarf worn back off the forehead. As the women became more confident of their Muslim image and more settled in the Muslim community they would then bring the scarf forward and tie it firmly to look distinctively Muslim. This means that there is a way of wearing a head-scarf which is not distinctively Muslim but which complies to Islamic requirements in some degree. For example, women coming out of the hair-dressers often cover their hair with a scarf and some women in the country especially involved in farming or working with horses may cover their heads but what makes the scarf Islamic is the way of pulling it well forward and fixing it so it covers the neck and part of the chest.

As we saw with our sisters who were born into Muslim families and then became aware of *hijab* such as Fadhilah, their *hijab* grew. From a small scarf tied behind the neck to fixing it to cover the neck and chest, the wearer is reflecting her growing knowledge of Islamic law and her growing confidence in complying with it.

Some respondents such as Lubna and one of the sisters from Glasgow felt comfortable wearing the Pakistani style shalwar kameez as everyday wear even before they wore the head-scarf. Even such

ethnic clothes worn by a western woman do not cause as much of a stir as the head-scarf itself which is why the decision to add a scarf to one's already Muslim outfit is seen as such a big step.

It seemed therefore much easier for our correspondents to adapt the rest of their clothes to fit Islamic requirements. As we saw, many of them opted for long skirts and blouses or sweaters. They might customize their own version of the Pakistani trouser suit by wearing loose trousers and a long shirt. I noticed that many of the women kept a British style and clothes that they had brought in the high street because the head-scarf was the item that marked them out as Muslims. We saw that Batool had worn *jilbabs* for a time and then began to customize her own outfit, which was more adapted to her own cultural background and yet complied with Islamic requirements.

Many Muslim women living in the West do not accept the argument that one should also wear an *abaya* or *jilbab* in the Arab style. Presumably this was because of climate, personal taste, the realization that Islam has come for all people for all times and the fact that one had more ease of movement if one wore clothes which were more culturally close to the society one was living in. There was a dislike of being taken for a pseudo-Arab or a pseudo-Pakistani when it was the faith in Islam, which was the point of identity for these women. There was also a dislike of people assuming Muslim women were dressing this way because of their husbands say so. They were taking this very big step and causing themselves this inconvenience and restriction out of obedience to Allah.

Respondents such as Ruqayyah had tried at one time or another the whole range of Islamic dress. Her story showed the wide freedom of choice open to the Muslim woman who can adapt her dress to suit the circumstances.

It may be much more comfortable to wear an *`abaya* to the mosque or an Islamic gathering whilst wearing a long western style skirt and blouse to work.

Maryam, the sister from a Guyanan family who converted to Islam in London progressed from wearing western style skirts and loose sweaters to the *jilbab*. The Muslim population is much more diverse and much larger in London so one would not have looked unusual in an Arabic style *jilbab* especially for black women. `A'ishah who we spoke to was also a black convert and had noticed they were not often acknowledged as converts in the same way as white women because of their skin color. It was often assumed that they came from Muslim families. In some ways, this was a disadvantage because they did not get the same positive response and support from born Muslims that white converts enjoyed but at the same time were perhaps able to adjust more quickly to the Muslim environment and to be accepted as Muslim more quickly. This meant that the wearing of Islamic dress in public would be less of a problem except with their family and friends.

The head-scarf, the *`abaya* and then the *niqab*. Although she later found it too stressful to wear in Britain, Maryam was a good example of someone whose dress had evolved completely so that she would be unambiguously known as a committed Muslim wherever she was. In the next section we will see how for some women, the *niqab* is a sign of the deepening of their Islamic faith and confidence in their Islamic practice.

Women realized that they had come a long way when at the start of their journey to Islam they could never imagine themselves wearing *hijab* to the point where going out without *hijab* feels in the mind of the wearer like going out without your Islam. The established *muhajjabat* may have struggled with *hijab* at first but it became second nature.

For those who were still in the early stages or were still struggling with the idea of *hijab*, one can sympathize.

Something that ought to conceal us, make us modest and not conspicuous often ends up making us stick out like a sore thumb. It is understandable that, especially new converts have days when they cannot handle the pressure to be different.

A theme that came up especially amongst the highly educated women was the expectations of parents. Pakistani parents, who had struggled hard to support their children through the education system and did not require their girls to wear *hijab*, accepted the fact that it was quite normal for some Muslim women in the West to go out without *hijab* or at least without a head-covering. They saw the head-scarf as an unnecessary barrier to their daughters' ease of movement and a possible threat to their success in education and career. Eventually the determination of a strongly committed woman would win them over but there must be many cases where the woman left off her *hijab* at her parents' request. For some of the convert women, parents who highly prized education and career success for women saw the head-scarf as making their daughters appear uneducated and of low status in society. This seemed to underlie the fear of 'the neighbors' finding out. This on top of the fact that by wearing *hijab* the woman was associating herself openly with a people who might be quite alien to her family and community. In all cases where the woman resolutely kept her *hijab* she finally won the grudging acceptance and later respect of the non-Muslims around her. It was only the first phase that was difficult.

From the surveys, I found the evolution of dress went hand in hand with the evolution of faith for these women. It was clear to almost all of them that *hijab* was a requirement and was part and

parcel of being Muslim. They experienced their outward dress as a sign of the struggle that they were making to make their faith their guiding force. They were going against the norms of a society in which one dresses up to go out, one displays one's beauty and actively attracts, where one displays one's status, wealth and style by one's clothes. These Muslim women were seemingly going in completely the opposite direction. By wearing *hijab* they were trying to play down their attractiveness, disguise their wealth, status and style and close part of themselves off. The stronger the faith within became, the more confidence they had to reflect that outwardly in their dress and to wear *hijab* with confidence. The most difficult times for the women were in periods of conflict or on-off times when they experienced the pressure not to look different, not to be openly Muslim.

One speaker at a lecture chastised the Muslim men in the audience for putting the women in the front line of the Islamic struggle. The women go about in conspicuous Islamic dress while the man by her side is dressed in tight clothes with no beard. He pointed out that it was easier for Muslim men to go about in western society ambiguously. It is not clear unless they say or give a name whether they are Muslims or not but women's dress sets them apart and marks them out as Muslims and thus they may be the first to suffer abuse or discrimination or ridicule and carry the lion's share of the burden of the negative feelings about Islam. Should not the men be openly and outwardly Muslim too so that women can find some safety in their shadow?

The evolution of these women's *hijab* seems to reflect their confidence in their Islamic decision in different places and the growing seed of their faith. For some it felt safe and normal to wear it in a mosque but not so easy out in the street to put up with the stares and questions and the change in image projected and not at all easy at

work and amongst family who have the closeness to ask why and make us justify this drastic change in image.

No wonder *hijab* is such a big thing.

d) A Commitment to *Niqab*

There are times as we saw with Maryam when the covering of the face is seen as an end point in the progression of faith when the woman sees herself as doing something more than the basic requirement in order to please Allah.

As we have seen there are some scholars who have said it is required for Muslim women to cover their faces except the eyes or one eye to see the way and there are others who say that although it is not *fard* it is a highly commendable act.

I did not conduct any full-length interviews with *munaqqabat* as there were very few living in my town at the time of the survey. I knew of a number of women, especially young university and college students who wore it in the capital and in cities like Birmingham and Manchester.

My main exposure to seeing women fully covered with a complete face veil has been in Mecca outside and inside the harem(holy mosque) and here I noticed many young girls fully dressed in the same way as their mothers, perhaps as young as eight or nine. I also came to know of some *munaqqabat* who had donned the *niqab* after moving with their families to the Middle East or young Middle Eastern women who had started to cover their face after gaining a deeper understanding of Islam.

Through observing and conversations with these women, I began to have some idea of the rationale for covering the face and how they felt about it.

The Saudi Arabian style of head-piece has several pieces layered and a black *`abaya* which is worn over the clothes put on from the head or neck. The layers can be lifted in stages so that at times it acts like a curtain which falls in front of the whole face and through which the woman can see. Underneath is the piece which leaves just the eyes uncovered and then when amongst the Muslim women or in the prayer area this second face piece can be removed to leave the face open.

In a country like Saudi Arabia where nearly all women wear this identical dress I wondered how women could be recognized either by their women friends or their children. How did the children playing around in the harem outer precincts, for example find their mothers when they returned to them in this vast sea of women dressed identically and with faces covered? Obviously, they had developed some homing instinct or other way of positioning their mother. Perhaps also they had distinctive shoes and a gait by which they could be recognized. I used to recognize *munaqqabah* acquaintances of mine by their children. As we have seen, there is very little need for women in metropolitan Saudi Arabia to go out in the streets as life is organized around the home and the car. In the poorer districts just outside the haram in Mecca were a community of Muslims of Nigerian origin who dressed in the Saudi style and they seemed to be more in abundance walking around the neighborhood. In a small district like this they would probably get to know each other and there would be times of day when fewer men were around and it was time for women to come onto the streets.

While it is sometimes disconcerting for women who do not cover the face to meet with a *munaqqabah* and not be able to recognize her, I wondered what it must be like from their perspective to be able to see without being seen.

As we know Muslims are required to lower their gaze but covering the face might make this more difficult as not being seen may give one a false sense of security rather like when one is wearing sunglasses.

The style of dress in Iran is similar to the Saudi Arabia with a thicker outer garment also in black called the chador, which comes down all over the body from the head in order to cloak the body. Often the chador will not have any fixings so that it can be held with the hand to cover the face leaving one eye open as was explained by some jurists. This makes it quite a versatile garment, which can be used with the face uncovered in the women's area and then pulled up to cover the face in the presence of men outside. The chador also covers the woman's ordinary clothes underneath so that she can be fully dressed for where she is going and just use the chador to cover herself until she gets to her destination. I liked this idea of not having to take into account the opinion of strangers or people who have nothing to do with you in choosing an outfit. For example, in the West a woman might want to dress up for a party or a special occasion but not want to be seen like this out in the street or on public transport so that she is forced to wear a kind of hybrid outfit or spend too long worrying about what people might think, people being strangers. The Muslim woman dresses for a known occasion and for people she is familiar with so the anxiety of dressing disappears and it is not done in such a random way.

Other ways of wearing the outer garment are seen amongst Afghan women and this is a very loose, wide cloak called the *burqa* of which the face piece is fixed, something resembling a fencing mask with gauze netting through which the woman can see but cannot be seen. This reminds me of the screen that was used in Muslim homes in past centuries to screen off the women's area so that the women could

observe the proceedings of the men without being seen. In Tunisia and other parts of North Africa, a white sheet type cloth is worn in a similar fashion to the chador and is pulled around the body over the clothes again with a versatile piece to cover or uncover the face.

I have seen variations on this sheet idea amongst Sudanese and Somali women and women of other African countries where the simple piece of cloth is used as a versatile cloak or over-garment. Very often, it is of lighter material being worn over long, thick dresses and of patterned material. Its main function is to cover the head and neck and the everyday clothes when going outside or getting ready for the prayers.

So in some cases the face covering is fixed and other times the cloth can screen or be removed as the case may be. Other types of face-cover consist of a handkerchief type piece on elastic which can be brought up to cover the mouth and nose leaving the eyes open and this could be in various colors according to the type of *`abaya* the woman was wearing. In this case the women could see and be seen. Those I spoke to in the interviews who did not favour *niqab* found it impeded communication with women considerably as one was unable to see the facial movements, especially the smile. Again, the way life is organized for the *munaqqabah* means that she will not have much cause to talk and interact in public places but go to meet and speak to other Muslim women in a place where she can uncover her face.

Why did women cover their faces, especially in a place like Scotland where it is very unusual?

For some it is a family tradition that they have not even questioned. Amongst Pakistanis it was quite common in parts of the UK. Their husbands or fathers required it of them or else they followed the example of their mothers and aunts. These women often

went out accompanied by their men folk, with other *munaqqabat* or only to safe places where they would not be bothered by strangers' reaction in the street. I did not know any of these women personally but I imagine if I had asked questions from my survey they would have been quite bemused to make such an issue of what, for them, was perfectly ordinary.

I asked some of the *munaqqabat* about *niqab* on an informal basis. The most pertinent question was whether they regarded it as obligatory or commendable. Most of the women I spoke to believed that it was not obligatory but was a very highly commended in that there was clear evidence that the wives of the Prophet as well as many of the female companions used to cover their faces outside.

They regarded it as a higher level of practice therefore and something for which they would be rewarded by Allah. They did not accept the argument that it was a ruling only for the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) due to the fact that they were in a special category above other women in regards to Islam. Neither did they accept the often quoted theory of some Muslims and many non-Muslims that the face cover was an affectation of upper-class secluded women later in the history of Islam.

Other women decided to cover their faces for practical reasons. When going to live in Saudi Arabia, for example, it would be much more convenient to follow the local custom so as not to stand out, especially as a light-skinned convert. This would be true to the spirit of *hijab* which prevents women drawing unnecessary attention to themselves.

Also, it was more convenient to wear in Muslim countries like Egypt or Malaysia where a sizable proportion of the women cover their faces. There would be nothing peculiar about it and the public knew how to interact with *munaqqabah* women.

Some women like the fact of not being recognized, thus being free to go about their business without any interference. They would not be curtailed by people's assumptions about their color or looks.

Other women, especially as distinctly foreign looking Muslims in a Muslim country were unhappy with the level of attention they received from curious men even when they wore a decent head-scarf and *jilbab*. Covering the face dealt with this problem so that they were able to go about freely without being stared at and embarrassed.

There is also an opinion that outstandingly beautiful women should cover their faces so as not to draw attention. This could also protect them from envy which in Islamic terms is regarded as being a source of harm from which the Muslim seeks refuge in Allah. The tricky problem here would be who is to be the judge of how beautiful one has to be to be considered worthy of a face-cover as deciding for oneself may be thought of as presumptuous or vain.

Niqab undoubtedly curtails the movements of women outside or their choices about interacting where men are present to a considerable degree so it could be said that it acts as a higher level of protection for the woman's religion. For example, it is not comfortable to eat and drink in public places with a face-cover unless they had women's accommodation as in some Muslim countries.

The *niqab* is seen as a negative thing by many Muslim women and it is easy to see some disadvantages in it, especially in western society.

One was the very point that freedom is curtailed, strangely enough exactly the same argument that women have against Muslim women who cover their heads. We often hear the phrase that 'women who wear *niqab* are going too far' as if wearing a head-scarf was hard enough and we do not need to add to our problems. Muslim women

sometimes saw *niqab* as a forerunner to other Islamic injunctions which erred on the side of greater caution for women. For example, would Muslim women be required to take a *mahram* with them when travelling outside their own town? Would they not be allowed to travel alone for study, for example, to another town or country without a *mahram* to chaperone them? There is difference of opinion about this amongst the scholars. Further, would Muslim women be more likely to be confined to the house except for strictly defined needs? Who would be the one to decide what a need was? Would sport and leisure be defined as a need or as an unnecessary luxury? This is why the fact of having to deal with *niqab* is a sore point for many women. Life, they believe, is hard enough for practising Muslims, especially in the West.

Conversely, there was a fear expressed that men could use the anonymity of the face cover to pose as women and present a threat or a danger. There was the danger of women using the full cover as a disguise to do evil and the possibility that women could impersonate each other in order to commit fraud for example or to cheat in exams. These kinds of problems were dealt with in Muslim countries by having a female invigilator check a woman's identity for exams and female guards at airports or in places where one has to prove one's identity.

Generally, there is a certain mistrust of people who want to go about unrecognized and a presumption that people should be willing to show their faces in society especially on the neighborhood level.

This was why another disadvantage was pointed out by some women who did not wear *niqab*, that it makes communication very difficult especially in transactions or neighborly discourse. The attitude seemed to be that if a woman wants to go out incognito without being recognized why one should greet her in the street or try

to have a conversation. The smiles and interactions that *muhajjabat* need in non-Muslim countries to feel strong enough to be different are then absent with women who cover their faces.

There is some irritation too with women who keep their faces covered in the lecture theatre at university that they are giving a dour impression of Islam which is supposed to be seen as this vibrant, positive force that we are offering to non-Muslims. Obviously, the prospect of having to cover oneself from head to toe like this is not very appealing to the average non-Muslim but then neither is wearing a head-scarf at first. My comments from the non-Muslims were sometimes very disapproving of the full face cover and black *'abaya* whilst they were quite accepting of head scarves.

Therefore, *niqab* is seen as impeding *da'wah*. If a woman has a job in a work-place where men are present, especially if she has to interact with men face to face, the argument is that she should look for a more suitable job rather than wear *niqab* in these circumstances. Teaching older boys or in a mixed class, for example, would pose difficulties for a *munaqqabah* woman so it would be easier for her to look for a job in a girls' school.

When looked at from the point of view of the *munaqqabah* herself these disadvantages then would be seen in her favor as far as the integrity of her religion was concerned as she would be forced to change her lifestyle, job, movements, etc., to fit with the way she wants to practice Islam rather than be forced by circumstances to compromise her decision.

What is it like for women who have this negative image from within and outside the Muslim community when they go out with their face cover?

In Muslim countries the experience was seen as very positive by many of the women I spoke to. There was a sense of relief and a feeling of being able to relax in this anonymity.

There was also a sense of achievement in coming to the point of emulating the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the early Muslim women and a feeling that one was closer to the true spirit of Islam and closer to Allah.

In the West, it was different story. Although the women I spoke to expressed the same sense of doing the best thing for their religion, they had many obstacles to contend with. There was disapproval, misinformation about this kind of garb, associations with women who were concealing arms and general teasing. Non-Muslims seemed to have picked up an idea that women wearing *niqab* belonged to a special category of extreme Muslims and were to be shunned or even verbally abused in the street. Presumably these women were by nature more retiring and shy in general and were thus unable to answer back or defend themselves.

Not all *munaqqabat* however were shy and retiring to the extent that there was a complaint on the part of some *muhajjabat* that in their experience women in *niqab* had a rather haughty or superior attitude. They held their heads high and felt themselves better than other women in the opinion of these observers. Obviously if one's behavior is at odds with the other injunctions of Allah such as modesty, kindness and good manners the dress alone is not going to do much good.

Muhajjabat who do not like *niqab* referred to certain Islamic principles in their argument, that the Prophet (peace be upon him) advised leaders to make things easy for the believers stating that religion should not be made difficult for people as they will turn away from it.

Another principle is that one action that is optional in certain contexts may do more harm than good and it is for the leaders of the Muslims to rule on what is best for the people in various contexts and at various times within the boundaries of what has been revealed.

For the *munaqqabah* she has chosen to take a more difficult path which needs strength and commitment and patience. She is able to withstand the negative reaction or comments because she is developing inner strength from her striving to please Allah.

e) Coming to Terms with *Hijab*

We have looked at the experience of women as they started wearing *hijab* for the first time and then gradually began to get used to it. Then we looked at the day to day experience of women who have been wearing *hijab* full time for a number of years.

- Some of my correspondents, however, had difficulty coming to terms with *hijab* as a full-time commitment due to pressures from outside and fears about the implications for their life and place in society. I wanted to discuss the experience of three of them to find out what these pressures were and to discover what it is like at this intermediate stage for women who believe that *hijab* is a must for Muslim women and wear it at times but do not have the confidence to wear it full time.

One of the women who took part in my survey was Paula. Her style of Islamic dress was usually a colorful scarf tied tightly round with a loose flowing trouser and tunic ensemble, usually a *shalwar kameez*. At the time of the survey she felt more comfortable wearing it in a Muslim environment where there were lots of Muslims around so that she could be identified as a Muslim. This was usually at the mosque.

Although she wore modest dress, she felt uneasy wearing a scarf in her home area because she was afraid of discrimination. She felt under scrutiny there if she wore her scarf and got quite a few nasty looks.

Before actually converting to Islam she would experiment with Islamic dress and felt quite happy with it and then upon her conversion she wore at times, at times not, though she felt that she should be more decisive and wear it all the time and she tried for quite some time. When her father died and some other big changes occurred in her life she lost confidence and moved to a new area with fewer ethnic minorities and so stopped wearing it.

Her family had mixed reactions to her *hijab*. Her grand-parents felt it was fine but her mother was not too happy and the residents of her mother's small village were not ready for this kind of change in image. Her brothers feared she would be teased. *Hijab* can be seen as quite a threatening thing, as a threat to women's freedom and a symbol of oppression.

Paula's close friends did not have a problem with her Islamic dress since many of them were interested in alternative and esoteric ideas although some of her newer college friends backed off a bit and saw her as oppressed.

She was accepted by her Muslim friends but conscious of being judged by them. She thought Muslims who wore *hijab* were doing what they were supposed to do. She did not think it was particularly courageous but just doing what was expected.

Again, she felt that women who wore *hijab* full-time might be judging her but had never felt their disapproval or that they thought themselves superior. They either accepted the fact that Paula did not always wear *hijab* or otherwise they did not know.

Paula did not think the *niqab* was either more pious or extreme but thought it was more difficult to wear in Britain. In Saudi, it would be a cultural choice. She never felt any negative reaction from those women who did wear it. She was aware of the different opinions about Islamic dress. Paula got to know the *fiqh* of Islamic dress from other Muslim women and from her own reading. Her husband never put pressure on her but seemed to feel more content when she wore it.

She regarded the *hijab* as an external sign of how she was feeling about her Islam and felt more confident when she stepped up her practice in general.

She did experience quite a few nasty incidents in the street when wearing *hijab* and was very sensitive to such remarks or looks. She was told '*go back to your own country*' and was spat at and even pushed. She was able to decipher the meaning of some of the looks from nasty to curious to pitying. Builders would sometimes come up with remarks and comments she got from some young men she just put down to ignorance.

She felt her behavior modified when wearing *hijab* in big shops. She was more modest and conscious of eye contact. She did not find she got inferior service but people were less forth-coming. She made an effort from her side to be more out-going with female staff.

She did not feel at home in the smaller Pakistani-run Muslim shops and she was sometimes treated as if she were a bit dim. Some thought she was an Arab and considered her as more strict and were maybe a bit intimidated by her. She did not feel any difference in the way she was treated in small non-Muslim shops with or without *hijab*.

Health workers were not usually patronizing but Paula would have an explanation ready as to why she did not want to see a male doctor if she was not wearing a scarf.

She did not fit in at her children's school when she wore *hijab* and this made school meetings awkward. People would give her half smiles but were not very forth-coming.

Paula felt very at home at Muslim gatherings and felt much better about her Islamic dress on these occasions. This came from a desire for a sense of belonging to a community and she liked the social life.

She has felt proud of her *hijab* at times and true to herself while at other times it has been a source of embarrassment and discomfort.

She has had a variety of reactions from other people. Some have been pleased with it, others indifferent to it. Some have pitied her and others have even got angry or upset about it.

She has been made to feel less attractive because people sometimes saw Muslims in *hijab* as dowdy and restricted and they tended to feel sorry for you. They would also regard you as being under your husband's thumb and oppressed and thus you felt under-valued as a person.

There would be times when you were treated as low status but sometimes the opposite when the other stereotype of the rich Arab sheikh came in.

● Rosena was a Muslim from a Pakistani family who grew up in the north-east of England and was studying in Scotland at the time of the survey. She wore *hijab* only in the mosque and at Muslim gatherings. This was for the prayer and also as a mark of respect and to be known as a Muslim.

In other areas of life, she felt it was not a priority even though she knew she should wear it. She felt that cultivating the inner spiritual qualities of *hijab* was more important as an expression of modesty. A key aspect of that for her would be treating others with respect. In her

experience she had noticed women who did wear *hijab* sometimes seemed to be lacking in these spiritual qualities.

She found out about the *fiqh* of *hijab* from reading and from other people.

Rosena's family did not urge her to wear *hijab* because they feared it would lead to discrimination and they felt behavior and one's way of talking were more important. Certainly, her father did not want Rosena to put herself at such a disadvantage.

She had no hesitation in declaring her Islam to everyone and was well known as being a Muslim amongst those she came into contact with. When she did see a Muslim woman who wore *hijab* she felt a bit inferior. She respected them and felt they had made their own decision. She used to assume they were necessarily better Muslims but after having more experience she came to know it was not always the case.

Regarding their attitude to her, they were sometimes hostile and preachy or criticized her. In Rosena's opinion, they seemed to ignore what was on the inside.

I noticed in the reports of those who were not wearing *hijab* that converts were given more leniency than born Muslims. The insinuation in their attitude was that it is something expected of a woman from a Muslim family whereas a convert needed a lot more time to adjust.

Rosena did not think *niqab* was required in Islam but again thought it was essentially the wearer's choice. She did not know many *niqab* wearers but those she knew were not hostile to her.

When she met women in *hijab* in the street, she usually acknowledged them and smiled. She herself, when she had worn *hijab* in the street, had not experienced any comments or insults. People

seemed to take it for-granted, possibly because of her family background. It appears again that there is a difference between the way dark-skinned and light-skinned women are regarded. The stares and surprise reported by my white correspondents seems to have to do with a perceived incongruity between what is regarded as part of 'ethnic' dress and a white British appearance. Women from Asian families however seemed to have less of a problem with people staring and this included dark-skinned converts such as Maryam.

Rosena had not suffered much in the way of racism in her twenty-three years.

Though she would not be afraid to wear it to her work as a hospital doctor, Rosena anticipated that there might be disapproval and she would fear discrimination regarding her career. Medical seniors tended to be particularly conservative anyway and might not look favourably on what is seen as projecting Islam. Rosena was aware of a general prejudice towards Islam despite the large number of Muslim workers in the health service.

Rosena wore *hijab* whilst visiting Pakistan and felt comfortable depending on who she was with and the circle she was moving in. *Hijab* made her more confident when working over there. Certain expectations surround *hijab* in Pakistan regarding class and culture and although higher class people did wear it, she felt it was generally associated with a lower social status.

She had not been made to feel less intelligent when wearing *hijab* at home in Britain and felt this was to do with the fact that most of her friends were students. Perceptions of physical attractiveness depended on the society and Rosena knew that the *hijab* was not associated with unattractiveness in most Muslim countries, especially in Arab countries where many of the people are very beautiful. This tended to

allay any fears about being seen to be unattractive. Also Rosena felt that many other things apart from appearance fed into various stereotypes people have about Muslims. Overall, Rosena felt the main pressure she felt regarding *hijab* was peer pressure.

- Shahila was also a medical student who had come over to Scotland from Malaysia. Like Rosena she wore *hijab* at mosques out of respect. Also she wore it at `Id and funerals. She was more inclined to wear it in Malaysia as she felt more confident especially since her mother also wore it.

She did not wear it at other times in the UK because it did not feel comfortable or right. However, she did aspire to gain inner confidence to wear it in the future being quite aware of the *fiqh* of *hijab* and that the matter was her own responsibility.

Shahila's family did their part by explaining the Islamic rulings but left it to her own decision. She knew her parents would be happy if she wore it but they did not boss her around

Shahila's friends were not that bothered. Sometimes they would ask when she was going to wear it and then felt they had fulfilled their Islamic duty to give her good advice. Even her male colleagues at medical school encouraged her to wear it. Finally, though her friends accepted her decision.

Shahila respected the decision of women who wore *hijab* and thought it was particularly brave in a non-Muslim country. Occasionally the *muhajjabah* women would act as if they were better than her but having seen *muhajjabat* indulging in non-Islamic behavior, Shahila knew that it was not always a guarantee of piety and it saddened her to see women projecting this kind of confusing message.

Also, Shahila used to think that women who wore *niqab* were more religious but came to see that in some countries it was just the cultural norm. Although she had limited experience of meeting women who wore *niqab*, she observed that *niqab* wearing women were just as diverse in their behavior and character as other Muslim women.

At medical school, she had not encountered many problems as a Muslim. Occasionally there would be a reaction. She noticed that *muhajjabat* found mutual support at work, which helped them get over the barriers.

When Shahila wore *hijab* at the mosque, she felt good and accepted because she felt part of the group. This made her wish she had the courage to wear it all the time and would sometimes feel ashamed that she did not. She would certainly have felt wrong had she not been wearing *hijab* at Muslim gatherings.

She would always smile when passing a *muhajjabah* in the street and did not mind if they ignored her. She did not wear *hijab* back home either but felt more wrong about that as one has less excuse in a Muslim country. She felt it was a retrograde step for a Muslim woman who had been wearing it in their home country to take it off in order to come to the UK.

In her experience, it was certainly better to wear it all the time or not at all than this half and half way she was experiencing.



Some of the sisters who were stuck at this half way point eventually gained the confidence to commit to *hijab* full time. In observing them, their behavior bore out a point that had often been made to me by Muslim women who were critics of *hijab*. This was the fact that the head-scarf and correct dress is no guarantee of a modest

and Islamic nature. These women were often more modest than other women who wore *hijab* and more self-analytic, able to realize their faults and sympathetic to others. It is not unheard of to come across bawdy, loud, arrogant or judgmental women even amongst those who wear proper Islamic dress.

What was understood, however, when discussing the matter with those who really wanted to wear *hijab* but did not have the confidence that outward and inward reality are inseparable in the final analysis. There is a symbiotic relationship between the dress and the person within. Deepening faith and desire to obey the Creator compels the believer to modify her lifestyle accordingly including dress whilst at the same time the discipline and experience of wearing correct Islamic dress impacts on the faith and character of the individual. In *hijab* it is both easier to behave as a Muslim and be known and treated as a Muslim.

f) Refuseniks

During my survey, I was interested in meeting Muslim women who had made a conscious decision not to wear *hijab* and to find out their reasons and feelings about that. These were women who identified as Muslims.

- Nada was a student from Palestine living in Scotland who had decided not to wear *hijab*.

She knew about the *fiqh* from school, from reading and from her husband and mother who did wear it. She said she was being honest with herself and had an instinct that *hijab* was not required.

Her family never pushed her to wear *hijab* and just advised her and made it seem a favourable choice. She wondered if she may have felt more compulsion if they had been strict with her.

Regarding women who did wear *hijab*, Nada felt safe and at home with them. She respected them and sensed a confidence and their belief in themselves and how they chose to live. She did sometimes perceive arrogance on the part of *muhajjabat*. Women who wore *hijab* always approached her in a nice way and mixed easily with her and respected her and did not seem to show any disapproval of her dress which was western style. There were times when a sister who wore *hijab* might ask out of curiosity why she did not wear it especially as she had many *muhajjabah* friends and attended Islamic lectures and gatherings. Some would advise her and once or twice, they confronted her because often she would be in a group where nearly everyone wore *hijab*. Although she had not experienced hostility, she had a subtle feeling that she was looked on as too westernized or not as good as the other women who wore *hijab*.

Nada also respected those who wore *niqab* while feeling it was a bit extreme. Although she did not criticize them or hold negative feelings towards them, she felt they were projecting a wrong image of Muslim women to the outside world. She thought that Muslim women have the right to look nice in public. The women who wore *niqab* always treated her kindly and with respect.

At the time of the survey her feelings about going out without *hijab* had changed a bit. Before that she did not worry but then she began to notice men's looks and felt ashamed and fear of God's punishment. She remained confident in her belief in Islam and did Islamic duties such as prayers but she was aware of an internal conflict.

She was treated fine at work, at shops and cafes and realized it was easier for a Muslim woman to function without *hijab* in a western country. In Muslim countries, reaction would depend on who one was

mixing with. She did not get more attention from men over there because of not wearing *hijab* but people would urge her to wear it and sometimes criticized her. In the UK, she would only feel self-conscious in front of her husband's friends.

Not wearing *hijab* would also make job interviews easier but she felt not being British presented a problem for interviewers anyway although Nada was of fairly European appearance and spoke English with a very good accent. She experienced some jealousy and racism at one of her jobs in a department store from Scottish staff who resented the presence of an Arab colleague who seemed to be popular with customers.

As a student, she felt either way made no difference. One was usually treated fairly, although it would depend on the individual.

She felt that women in *hijab* might be perceived as less intelligent, as second class citizens, as terrorists even, certainly as unattractive or ridiculous and as too hot in warm weather. It would not be so bad in London probably but Nada also thought many people would be indifferent to it though we as Muslim women think it is so significant. For this reason, she wondered if some *muhajjabat* became over-sensitive and would be inclined to misinterpret some looks and comments.

One of the negative aspects of some women who wore *hijab* that Nada perceived is the fear of poor personal hygiene. She had had the experience of women who wore Islamic dress in a dishevelled way or failed to mask body odor and she certainly did not want to be associated with this tendency. She felt Muslim women had a responsibility to uphold the Islamic teachings on excellent personal hygiene.

Although some bad behavior of *muhajjabat* had put her off, she knew there were enough good Muslim women all over the world. In the end, the decision about dress was down to the individual regardless of nationality or culture.

- Jumana was a Muslim woman living in Scotland. She originally came from Syria and had chosen not to wear *hijab*. She became aware of the *fiqh* from school, family and her own personal reading. Her immediate family did not wear *hijab* either and she knew that if she decided to wear it they would want her to be sure why she was doing so. Some of her extended family wore *hijab* because they were required to from outside pressure and Jumana knew this was their reason. They accepted her decision not to wear it.

Jumana certainly did not favour *hijab* and regarded women who wore it as doing so because of their limited experience with a few exceptions. (I encouraged my respondents to be frank in their interview even though they knew I wore *hijab* myself). She felt women who wore *hijab* had a different mentality to her.

She had perceived disapproval from their side and some asked questions or for advice and she suspected that, some discussed her case amongst themselves. She felt that some *muhajjabat* felt they were better than her.

Neither did Jumana like *niqab* and regarded it as an over reaction. In her opinion, it came from a mentality that the more one suffers the better one becomes. She felt some Muslims had misunderstood their religion, especially regarding entry into Paradise. She did not have contact with *niqab* wearers but felt it was very impractical. She thought that Muslims should spend more time on their inner *hijab*.

At work Jumana felt Islamic *hijab* would be restrictive as she was a surgeon in the operating theatre. Presumably, surgeons would be required to wear specific clothes in theatre in any case. She knew of a student who normally wore *hijab* and who only passed the viva of her medical exams when she took it off. If this is the case it would bear out Rosena's impression that the medical profession are rather conservative about dress codes.

Jumana thought it was true that *muhajjabat* have been perceived as more downtrodden and of lower status but not necessarily less attractive. Being a non-*hijab* wearer herself she did not feel any sisterhood towards *muhajjabat* in the street, only if she knew them personally. Neither did she feel any personal affinity to Muslims in general but she treated people as they behaved whether or not they were Arabs or Muslims.

Since Jumana did not wear *hijab* at all, she did not feel at home during Islamic gatherings such as wedding and funerals. She was put off by the atmosphere and felt uncomfortable.

- Hala an Egyptian woman living in Scotland was my third respondent who had decided not to wear *hijab* out of conviction and she had never worn it.

When she reached adolescence back home, she wanted to wear it and asked her father to buy it for her. He felt insecure about it and told her to wait and then she never asked again.

She learnt the *fiqh* of *hijab* growing up in Egypt from school, radio and *khutbahs*. Personally, she thought it was unnecessary as not wearing it makes practical life easier and less restrictive. For example, it is easier to run for a bus. She discovered later that her father was relieved she had decided not to wear *hijab* after all. Her younger sister

experimented with it for a while and then took it off. It was not part of the family tradition and Hala's father felt it was associated paradoxically with showy people. He encouraged his family to develop their inner *hijab*. Certainly, Hala was aware of quite a lot of bad behavior on the part of *muhajjabat*. She accepted the way they wanted to dress but was aware that they were not always practising good character. She knew a lot of women who did it for a variety of reasons. She had respect for those who had made their own decision but not if they did it blindly.

She had been aware of remarks directed at her from *muhajjabat* and that they did not accept her and were apprehensive of her. Some even asked if she was a Christian and she knew they disapproved. She felt that those who were wearing *hijab* for the wrong reasons felt superior to her and those who had made their own decision usually did not feel that way.

Hala was very hostile to *niqab*, feeling that it sends out a wrong message and that it is even an insult to her religion. She thought that these women were misguided. Women who wore *niqab* did not talk to her and treated her like a misguided '*jahiliyyah*' (ignorant person) as far as she was concerned. She gathered it had something to do with politics. She thought that ignorant people were manipulated with religion and felt themselves to be leaders who were able to lecture others. As far as Hala could tell it was just a sop to the poor.

Hala did not feel a sense of sisterhood towards Muslims in the street and did feel something of an outsider at Islamic gatherings where *hijab* was the norm.

She had bad experiences of education in Egypt in that when she posed a legitimate question in class or made a stand about *hijab* she

was singled out. She felt the girls who continued to wear *hijab* obediently were happy to remain ignorant.

- I was especially grateful to these women especially for frankly expressing their reasons about choosing not to wear *hijab*, especially to myself as a *muhajjabah*. It made me understand better how women, especially from a Muslim background can develop a negative perception of *hijab* due to bad experience of *muhajjabah* behavior or poor education at home. I felt it was a strong decision to stick by one's conviction not to wear it, despite pressure from the *hijab* wearing community and those who did not approve.

Of course, the more obvious advantages spring to mind when we look at the situation of these women. They were more free to function in western society where *hijab* is a drawback and were thus enabled to pursue their careers or interests or just enjoy the pleasures of western public life without hindrance. Yet, it was interesting to see that they took my questions seriously and felt it quite normal to be asked to justify why they were not wearing *hijab* in the context of the Islamic *fiqh* and in the case of Nada, whose Islamic upbringing did cause doubts to arise in her mind. Of the three, she was the one who was able to socialize most happily with *muhajjabah* friends whereas Jumana especially felt entirely alienated from the *hijab* wearing Muslim community. I thought their criticisms and sometimes hostile feelings about the image of *hijab* and *niqab* was something the *muhajjabat* could learn from. The concept of 'the inner *hijab*' kept coming up in the context of those who had refused or were struggling with *hijab* as if the two were mutually exclusive, as if you leave your outer *hijab* until your inner *hijab* is ready to contain it.

As we have said, for those who wear the outer garments we have the understanding that there is a symbiotic relationship between

outward signs and inner reality in Islam and the one helps the other but only if the outer is regulated according to *shari`ah*. So perhaps the lesson the *muhajjabah* can learn from the refusniks is that we should be sure that our attitude and character and courtesy in public go hand in hand with the pious modest demeanor we are showing on the outside. It will be even less likely that the young Muslim girls of today will adopt *hijab* in the West if their experience of *muhajjabat* is of mostly ill-mannered, arrogant women. At the same time, the principle of correct behavior is that it is correct in its own right regardless of individual failings. To say, 'I do not wear *hijab* because all the *muhajjabat* I know are horrible women' is also a bit of a cop-out. The courageous response to that would be to go out and become the one nice *muhajjabah*.

g) The Young Ones

I was especially grateful to the young Muslimahs who agreed to talk to me. It was very inspiring and admirable to see how they had the courage to be different from their peers at such a young age. It was especially admirable because the pressures in non-Muslim society in general work in the opposite direction. In Britain there is an assumption that when the weather heats up for our brief summer that clothes should come off and it is not uncommon to see women out in what would be considered as their underwear in many Muslim countries.

Head covers are almost obsolete in Britain today except as quirky fashion items.

There is pressure on young people to be concerned with music, fashion, film and drama, sport and superficial relationships with the opposite sex. These factors all feed into the young woman's image

of herself as a totally free agent who is alive to experience bodily pressures. It is not fashionable to be concerned with serious political issues, to be concerned about the suffering in the world to the extent that one has to do something about it or to contemplate the spiritual realm. Of course, it is in the nature of the young to rebel against the status quo and overturn what they are fed by the media and the social pressure around them and my correspondents were such young women who were taking faith seriously.

● Ne`ima was fifteen at the time of the survey and was wearing *hijab* like her mother and younger sister. She was attending a girls' school. Ne`ima's mother was a Scottish convert who we met in a previous section and her father was from Palestine and had been living in Scotland for many years. Ne`ima was already wearing *hijab* all the time as required and felt it was the right thing to do. By the time we spoke she felt totally comfortable with it. She learnt the *fiqh* of *hijab* from her mother. Her mother's pride in her daughter's decision and confidence about *hijab* was tinged with the wistful feeling that mothers have when their daughters are growing up because the start of *hijab* is a landmark in the life of a young woman that marks that time of the end of childhood. Ne`ima's father was surprised at how easily she had taken to it but also proud of her. Ne`ima did not wear *niqab* and did not have much time for it thinking it made the wearer look a bit sad. She may have tried it on for special occasions but found it embarrassing to think of women in *niqab* in restaurants. She felt uncomfortable with Muslim women who did not wear *hijab* and this raised questions in her mind as to their reasons. She found they did not understand her reasons for choosing to wear it. She was surprised that so many Muslimahs from Arab and Pakistani backgrounds did not wear it as she would have thought they had more reason to and was surprised that some converts took it on with more confidence than

their Muslim born sisters. She did suffer some prejudice about her dress with people making nasty comments, chasing her and even spitting. This was mainly from unruly young people and she found if she answered back, they would get more bold. Ne`ima was quite able to defend herself however against these youngsters. Her school-friends were intrigued at first but eventually treated the *hijab* a part of her. They saw it as completely part of her identity although they were curious to know what kind of hairstyle she had under her *hijab*. Teachers also respected her and found her more responsible and polite. She herself would try to stop anyone disrespecting the teachers. She had sometimes been made to feel downtrodden by other Arabs or patronized by them. She wanted to be more in control of her life compared with some of the Arab Muslims she had known. She was also angered if she felt ignored by them when they would go into their own clique. The experience is obviously different for someone who has one parent from the Arab world and another from Britain and it is also different when one grows up in the UK rather than an Arab country with both parents being Arabs. In this sense she was not regarded as an Arab by some of these women and they did not show any fellow feeling with her. Ne`ima was not made to feel of lower status because of her *hijab* and felt on the whole proud and respected. Although at times self-conscious and ambivalent about her image, she felt she would not give it up.

- Ne`ima's sister Sakina was a couple of years younger when she answered my survey and she was in the early stages of taking on *hijab*. She was trying hard but had to put up with teasing from boys her own age trying to pull it off. She knew all about the *fiqh* from following her mother and sister's example. Again her parents were a little bit sad that their daughter was coming to the end of her

childhood but very positive about *hijab*. Sakina did not think much of *niqab* and thought it looked odd though she would not like to offend the wearer. She imagined these women got stared at a lot but perhaps it was all right if they had been brought up to think it quite normal.

Muslims who did not wear *hijab* were a bit more full of themselves in her opinion and claimed they did not need it. Some would even dare her to take it off. She also felt there was racism towards white-skinned Muslims or those who appear to be white. Like her sister Sakina got a lot of abuse from youngsters in the street including swearing and spitting. She found being called 'Paki' very hurtful and sometimes builders would stare. She herself was proud of her Scottish identity and so being treated as an outsider really rankled.

Amongst her peers, the *hijab* acted as a barrier at first but then on hearing her Scottish accent people would approach her and she became popular. She had a good-humored relationship with her teachers. She found a shared interest in football was an ice-breaker for some people. They may have been put off by the scarf at first but eventually Sakina's bubbly character would win them over.

She experienced rudeness in shops and suspicions that she was a shop-lifter and she was often stared at during football and hockey matches. She had sometimes been made to feel of lower status in society because of her *hijab* but on the whole was proud although self-conscious. At the time of the survey she was a bit fed up and was struggling with it but overall found the discipline of wearing *hijab* strengthened her faith.

Three other young girls took part in my survey to help me get a picture of how young women coped with looking different from the crowd.

● Salma and Huda were sisters having parents both from the Middle East. They had been brought up in Scotland. They both wore *hijab* all the time as required and were of school age at the time of the survey.

Salma thought it was a good step and began to wear it of her own accord even though her parents thought she was quite young. One of the advantages she said was that you did not have to worry about your hair-style. Huda was also encouraged by her sister's enthusiasm and their mother had made it clear to them that *hijab* was required. The girls learnt the *fiqh* of *hijab* from their parents and from Arabic school. Their parents were pleased and proud that the girls were showing their commitment to their faith in this way and it was an endorsement of their sound Islamic upbringing.

Huda's friends took a little while to get used to her new look and found it a bit strange and different at first whilst Salma's friends were fine about it from the start and liked it.

Regarding Muslim girls who did not wear *hijab* having reached the required age Huda assumed it was because they were afraid of looking different and insecure. She thought they were maybe waiting until they were older. Huda felt the girls at school were embarrassed to see her in *hijab* as they regarded her as being too young or maybe saw it as a challenge to themselves.

Salma tended not to bring the topic up in case the girls would be angry or sensitive about it.

Huda thought the wearing of *niqab* was a personal choice and Salma thought it was all right but perhaps too hot.

In the street, Huda was aware of a few looks of surprise from passers-by. In the beginning, she was jeered at a bit by boys at school but they would also ask questions about it. Salma took such questions as a chance to talk about Islam.

The teachers held certain expectations of them according to Huda maybe expecting them to behave better. She also felt the teachers were more lenient towards them. However, this was not Salma's impression and she felt they were treated the same as everyone else.

Huda felt very relaxed and comfortable in Islamic gatherings. Overall, she felt more respect though she sometimes felt left out. Salma thought *hijab* had helped her become a better Muslim. The only disadvantage they could think of would be hot weather or difficulty when playing sport. They both felt they would fit in very well in the Middle East.

- Their friend Maryam was also at high school. She had also been brought up in Scotland having her mother from Scotland and her father from Palestine. She wore *hijab* all the time as required. She had taken the start of high school as her turning point and a good chance to present her new image though her parents did not feel she needed to rush. Like her friends, Maryam found out about the *fiqh* of *hijab* from her parents and from Arabic school. Her parents were pleased and her friends reacted very well. They acknowledged it without fuss.

Maryam did not approach other Muslims to give advice if they were not wearing *hijab*. She did not approve of *niqab* as she understood that Muslim women were required to cover themselves but to leave the hands and face open. She did not get much reaction from school as it was her first year but some girls asked her out of interest in her religion. Maryam got more respect from teachers but also felt they expected her to be better behaved.

Overall, she felt safe and a better Muslim for wearing *hijab* and totally at home during visits to the Middle East.

- These young girls were the pioneers of a contemporary '*hijab* culture' in the non-Muslim environment of the UK. These were girls who had spent all or most of their lives in the UK and had all their immediate family in the UK. This meant that they belonged to the country in a different ways from recent arrivals or people who were only passing through for education or trade. It is important for the future of such young women that they can develop this normalizing of *hijab* in the British context so that it no longer looks foreign or bizarre but as ordinary as umbrellas and sunglasses.

Some Muslim parents dress their very young daughters in *hijab* from their earliest years. Their belief is that the earlier one starts, the easier it will be for the girls to adapt to *hijab*. This approach is seen as rather sad by others who think young girls cannot be denied the freedom to run about carefree in childhood and to feel the wind in their hair.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those parents who decided to allow their girls to make their own decision about whether to wear *hijab* and at what age. The problem here is that if left too late, career and peer group choices might well steer the girl away from the milieu where *hijab* is accepted. They may fear that their choice in employment or education may be hampered if they dress differently from the majority. As we saw in the interviews migrant parents are especially eager to maximize their children's chances of integrating in the mainstream culture to spare them the difficulties faced by the older generation.

Generally, girls who belong to practising families are introduced to *hijab* at around the age of seven when they go to their Qur'an lessons or attend the mosque. It is gradually worn more often until the age of puberty when it becomes obligatory. In some cases, the girl is presented with her *hijab* at about the age of twelve and starts to wear it

from then. Presumably, she is taught about it beforehand and has time to prepare herself for the initial self-consciousness.

When reading the experience of our young interviewees it is also important to remember that there are aspects of their age being in adolescence which may have given them anxieties about their appearance regardless of *hijab*. Nearly all young people agonize over some aspect of their appearance whether it is their features, hairstyle or clothes and worry whether they fit in with the accepted norm. *Hijab* is so different from normal in many British schools that it actually often escapes censure because the girl is so obviously not trying to fit in with set standards.

In the case of pupils at a Muslim school or in a town with a large Muslim population it is much easier for a young girl to make her debut in *hijab* and blend in with her peers. Young people need back-up from a whole culture to support them in what adults tell them is right. In the end, it is the vibrancy and vitality of the surrounding Muslim and Muslim friendly culture which will ease the transition of girls from Muslim childhood to adulthood.

- Here we have had an insight into the minds of women we may pass in the street and wonder about and we have a little more idea of what motivates practising women to wear *hijab*, to be uncertain about it and to resist it and perhaps finally to submit to it as a command from the Almighty Allah. We have seen frank answers about how Muslim women perceive their sisters who do and do not wear it and also those who wear *niqab*. This can only help our understanding of how central *hijab* is to many women's practice of their Islamic faith and thus how it cannot be ignored.

It is a question that comes up at some time for all women who care or have cared about their religion, their relationship to their Creator,

their adherence to His injunctions and more pressing daily concerns, the perception of family, friends, colleagues, the desire to fit in and to be accepted and yet to be known as who you really are and for what you really believe inside.



What is it like for the women in the street to go about in *hijab*, especially in non-Muslim society where *hijab* may make you the object of unwanted attention and where a headscarf may be greeted with a variety of responses from hostility to bafflement?

This book casts a fresh look at *hijab* from a variety of angles setting out the well-known basic teachings on Islamic dress and then analyzing the '*hijab* debate' to determine what people have decided is acceptable dress for Muslim women of today. We take a look at some of the controversies that have surrounded *hijab* in the workplace and in educational establishments, some aspects of public policy towards *hijab* and the feelings behind some of the attitudes of non-Muslims to the *hijab* phenomenon.

Finally, we hear from a group of Muslim women themselves, housewives, workers and students to find out why some of them remain fearful of wearing *hijab* in modern society and why some have chosen not to wear it.

The writer is a novelist also known as Sara Baker. Brought up in London, she received her higher education in Manchester and then traveled to work as a teacher in Japan where she embraced Islam by the grace of Allah after extensive reading. On her return to the UK she married and went to live in Scotland where she was blessed to be part of a thriving Muslim community and to be involved in *Da'wah*. It was here that she wrote '*From Utah to Eternity*', a novel which describes the internal and personal struggles of conversion to Islam and the world of missionaries set in Japan that she remembers with great affection. She has also written from an Islamic perspective on a variety of issues including education, childbirth and modern society.



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