

Muslim women identify themselves with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is commemorated for her piety and modesty. Indeed, Islam honors Mary as one of the exalted women of all times. The Quran, the holy book of Islam, relates her story in numerous places; in fact, Ch. 19 of the Quran is titled "Mary."

"The angels said to Mary: 'Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure: He has truly chosen you above all women.'" (Quran 3:42)



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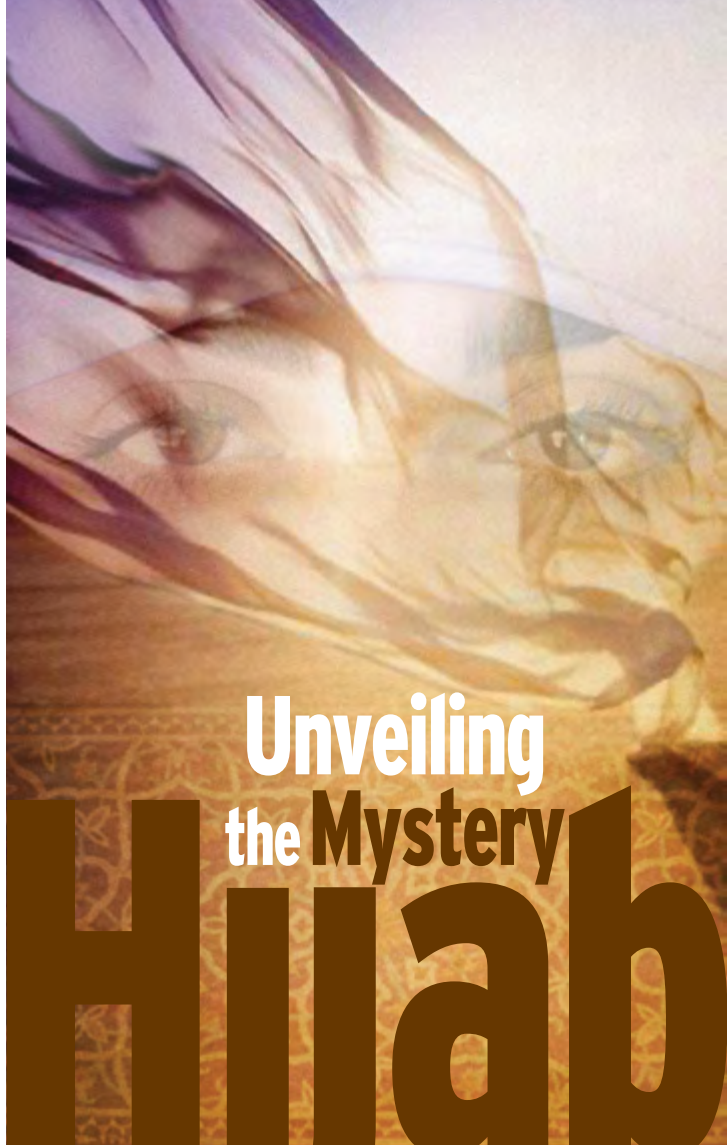
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Unveiling the Mystery

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AN ICNA PROJECT

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Islam's code of modesty extends to all aspects of one's life, including attire. Hijab, the head-covering worn by Muslim women, is an outer manifestation of an inner commitment to worship God. This brochure explores the different dimensions hijab brings to the lives of women and the responsibility men and women share in upholding modesty in society. Along the way, it debunks common stereotypes and celebrates the voices of women who practice hijab with pride!

Wearing hijab is a personal and independent decision that comes from a sincere yearning to please God while appreciating the wisdom underlying His command.

One of the questions often asked by people is, "Why do Muslim women cover their heads?" The answer lies in understanding the essence of one's existence as explained in Islam.

Muslims believe that their true purpose in life is to worship God according to His instructions, as revealed in the holy book of Quran and through the teachings of Muhammad^p, the final prophet of Islam. Worship in Islam is a holistic concept which encourages God-consciousness in every facet of daily life, from charity and neighborliness to prayer and honest dealings in business. Modest clothing is an integral aspect of worship in Islam as well.

In the Quran, God says, "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..." (Quran 24:31). When God revealed this verse, the female companions of the Prophet Muhammad^p promptly adopted these guidelines. In a similar spirit of obedience, Muslim women have maintained modest covering (hijab) ever since.

Hence, the primary motivation for wearing the hijab is to obey God (Allah in Arabic).

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Wearing hijab is a personal and independent decision that comes from a sincere yearning to please God while appreciating the wisdom underlying His command. Many people mistakenly believe that women are forced to wear the hijab. This concept is not based on Islamic teachings as God says in the Quran, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Quran 2:256). Likewise, Prophet Muhammad^p never forced religion upon anyone. If a woman is being forced to cover, it is contrary to this clear Islamic principle and might be due to cultural or social pressure. According to Islam, a woman willfully chooses to commit to this act of worship.

Days of contemplation, an inevitable fear of consequences as well as reactions and, ultimately, plenty of courage weigh heavily in making the leap. Katherine Bullock, a Canadian convert to Islam, stated, "For me, the lead up to the decision to wear hijab was more difficult than actually wearing it. I found that, praise be to God, although I did receive negative comments from people, I appreciated the feeling of modesty that wearing the hijab gave me."

Further, many people make the error of thinking that the hijab is a definitive statement of a woman's religiosity, as if it is a clear indicator of her spiritual

Hijab: a form of an internal moral system

commitment. While veiling is a reflection of one's beliefs, the hijab simultaneously becomes a tangible reminder to the woman herself: to embody the modesty and dignity it represents and to carry one's self in a way that pleases God. In that sense, the hijab symbolizes a journey of devotion rather than the end-result of piety.

"After I started wearing hijab," continued Bullock, "I noticed that people would often behave more cautiously with me, like apologizing if they swore. I appreciated that. I feel that wearing hijab has given me an insight into a decent and upright lifestyle."

Another Muslim woman, Saba Baig, a graduate of Rutgers University who currently lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and children, reminisced, "Before I started covering, my self-perception was rooted in other people's perceptions of me. I dressed to elicit compliments, keep up with the latest trend, wear the most desired brand name ... very little of it had to do with me, and more importantly, what God thought of me. Pre-hijab, I was in bondage to the surrounding society; post-hijab, I became attached to God. With that connection to God came an enormous amount of freedom. Confidence and self-respect were just some of the benefits."

AMBASSADORS OF FAITH

Generalizations and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are rampant in today's society and, by extension, in the minds of many people whose worldview is shaped by the media. Muslim women in hijab are frequently stigmatized; they are regarded on the one hand as oppressed and, on the other, as religious fanatics. Due to such misconceptions, unfortunately, the larger society fails to acknowledge and appreciate Muslim women's courage in standing up to societal norms in their determination to preserve their modesty.

Hijab clearly identifies women as followers of Islam, which can have its disadvantages in a land where

misinformation about the faith and its adherents abounds. For instance, some Muslim women are discriminated against in the workplace while others are emotionally abused through insensitive remarks. Yet, drawing on inner strength and resolve, Muslim women take these incidents in stride. Their love for God and commitment to modesty empower them in the face of challenges.

Indeed, Muslim women identify themselves with Mary who is commemorated for her piety and modesty. Aminah Assilmi, who converted to Islam in 1977, was once asked about going out in public without her hijab and she responded, "I cannot help but wonder if they would have ordered Mary, the mother of Jesus, to uncover her hair."

"By focusing on what God wants from me, and thinks of me, I am no longer a prisoner of other people's desires," declared Baig. "Knowing that I am doing what God, my Creator, has ordained for me gives me a contentment and happiness like no other."

Despite all the odds, Muslim women in hijab have managed to carve a niche for themselves while upholding their Islamic identities. They actively participate in their surroundings, be it as homemakers or professionals, on the sports field or in the artistic arena, in public service or in charitable activities. Conspicuous in their head-coverings, these women have become ambassadors of the Islamic faith.

MUTUALITY IN MODESTY

More than a dress code, the hijab encompasses modest behaviors, manners and speech. The inner humility as exhibited through etiquettes and morals completes the significance of the physical veil. However, contrary to popular belief, these characteristics are not limited to women alone.

God also commands men to maintain their modesty in the Quran: "Tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is well aware of everything they do" (Quran 24:30).

In Islam, the responsibility falls on each gender to protect their own modesty and to control their own desires.

Whether a woman dresses modestly or not, it is the obligation of each man to guard his own chastity. While many people may think that hijab is worn primarily to restrain men's illicit desires, this is another misconception. Indeed, it is not women's duty to regulate the behavior of men. Men are accountable for their own conduct; they are equally required to be modest and to handle themselves responsibly in every sphere of their lives.

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In reality, Muslim women wear the hijab to seek the pleasure of God and to uphold Islam's code of modesty. The majority of women who wear hijab consider it a constant reminder that they do not adorn their bodies for men. "Hijab forces someone to look past the external and focus on the internal. How many women do we know that feel they have to sexualize themselves to gain attention; why don't we see as many men wearing short bottoms and tighter tops? Because we have always given men a pass on their looks, demanding from them success and intellect instead," reflected Baig.

"Women however, are valued for their looks, their beauty. We have entire industries built upon making a woman feel that she isn't pretty enough, or thin enough," she added. "Hijab, on the other hand, takes one beyond the superficial. It elevates her in society by desexualizing her, and individuating her instead."

Islam is a religion of moderation and balance; it does not expect women alone to uphold society's morality and dignity. Rather, Islam asks men and women to strive mutually to create a healthy social environment of practical values and morality. In short, the concept of modesty in Islam is holistic, and applies to both men and women. The ultimate goal is to please God and to maintain a wholesome and stable society.

As more and more Muslim women embrace hijab, they renew their commitment to God through their appearance as they continue their lifelong spiritual journey. Unfortunately, such women often seem mysterious to those not acquainted with the religious significance of hijab. Understanding the beliefs and lifestyle choices of Muslims, and the emphasis

Islam places on modesty, eliminates the stereotypes associated with hijab. People of many different faiths and beliefs make up this patchwork world of ours. Muslims are an integral part of this diversity. It's time we overcome our fears and bridge our distances. So, the next time you see a Muslim, stop and chat with them – and decide for yourself!

In the Quran, God declares,

"...In God's eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware"

(Quran 49:13).

Islam clearly establishes that men and women are equal in front of God. At the same time, it does recognize that they are not identical. God created men and women with unique physiological and psychological attributes. In Islam, these differences are embraced as vital components to a healthy family and community structure with each individual contributing their own distinctive talents to society.

Hence, God's rules apply to both genders, but in diverse ways. For example, men are also required to cover parts of their body out of modesty, but not in the same way as women. Similarly, men are prohibited from wearing silk clothing and gold ornaments whereas women have no such restrictions. Therefore, God has ordained different commands for men and women while encouraging both to be modest.

Written by Saulat Pervez

Note: The superscript "p" next to Prophet Muhammad^p represents the invocation Muslims say with his name:

May God's peace and blessings be upon him.