

Covering Up: Sanitized and Sinister Campaigns of Persuasion - “When conducted in English, the hijab debate is straightforward”... but...

Friday 24 February 2017, by [ARBABZADAH Nushin](#) (Date first published: 8 July 2016).

Hijab is an individual choice. The woman who wears it feels the headscarf empowers her as a symbol of her distinct identity. Arguments like these address our core liberal beliefs, such as the right to individual choice and the duty to empower the disempowered. We encounter these arguments every time a hijab debate that take place in the English language public sphere. We read and listen and find ourselves persuaded even when we don't actually like the idea of headscarves. But still, we feel persuaded. After all, if we, who live in liberal democracies, deny women individual choice, then, who are we but hypocrites? More importantly, if we deny such minority women a sartorial strategy for empowerment, then, who are but oppressors? This is how we are persuaded. Through our own arguments.



When conducted in English, the hijab debate is straightforward. The pro-hijab organizations appeals to our own liberal values, to our sense of fairness and compassion for those in need of empowerment. The address to apparently shared values in addition to the emotional plea for compassion make resistance to the idea of hijab difficult. The combined effect is that we feel intellectually disarmed and emotionally discouraged to resist such arguments. Many women in the West have been persuaded by these arguments, including women leaders and politicians who have started to wear the hijab in their meetings with Muslim leaders inside and outside of the West. All this is testimony to the success of the pro-hijab persuasion campaigns in the Anglo-Saxon world. The English language debate is powerful precisely because it's sanitized, tailored to persuade people whose liberal instinct would normally make them balk at the idea that covering up women amounts to empowering them.

In Islam's own vernacular languages, from Arabic to Urdu and Farsi, the same persuasion takes a darker and more sinister turn. Here, the method is psychological and even more powerful as it uses terror and shame to make women wear the hijab. Here is a recent example from the Farsi language social media.



The picture showing an onion next to a rotten potato has been circulated widely on the social media. The accompanying text says, "Have you ever seen an onion that is rotten? No. That's because the onion is covered with seven layers of chador while the potato, with its thin cover, is always in danger of getting worms. Hence, sister, be an onion."

The message is clear. A bareheaded woman is a rotten woman. Through such campaigns, women who refuse to wear the hijab are stigmatized, presented as a threat to society, as carriers of diseases that make the skin rot. Where do ideas for this sort of sinister persuasion campaigns come from? We don't know for certain. We would, however, be forgiven for thinking of similar campaigns in the past. For example, the Nazis' depiction of the Jewish people as carriers of disease and rot.

An urban legend directed at Muslim girls who live in America is another example of how fear is used in online persuasion campaigns to make girls cover their heads [1]. Here's the legend in English translation:

"One night, a Muslim girl in New York was walking home from college. After a while, she noticed that a man. The man was wearing a hoodie that covered his face. He was following her. She became terrified and started reciting verses from the Quran. Thanks to god, all went well and she arrived home alright. But the following morning, she heard in the news that a girl had been raped that same night on the same street at the same time. This other girl's dead body was now discovered between two buildings. Police were asking the public for witnesses who could identify the murderer. The Muslim girl went to the police station and from behind the one way mirror, she identified the murderer from among the eight people who stood in the police line-up. Police then asked the killer, 'You also followed a hijabi girl that night but you didn't rape her. How come?' He said, 'I was afraid because there were two large men accompanying her.'"

The message of the urban legend is also clear. If a girl doesn't cover her head, she risks rape and being murdered. But if she covers up, god sends angels down to earth to protect her. Is this a message of empowerment?

If women are persuaded through fear and shame, in religious sermons men are encouraged to treat women as untrustworthy and inferior beings. Here's an example from a sermon by the Iranian supreme leader Ayatullah Khamanei.

"Many women who don't cover up, they do so because there's no man in their life to tell them don't do this, this is a bad thing... It's damaging me. It's damaging men. Many of these women are not aware of the damage they cause. They make men divorce their wives, gets into fights with their wives which, in turn, affects their sons and their sons lose their way and are led astray. Such women don't know what crimes they are committing with their lack of hijab. They ask, 'Why can't I be free?' Listen you, you without the hijab, you are a killer."

As we can see from the sermon, a core part of the hijab campaign is to relieve men from taking responsibility for their own actions. Needless to say, the vastly exaggerated power attributed to the bareheaded woman is in sharp contrast to the actual reality of her persecution, stigmatization and criminalization. Once again, we would be forgiven for being reminded of the Nazi propaganda campaigns. After all, they, too, were full of hysteria and vast exaggerations. They, too, turned the reality upside down by pretending that the persecuted victims of the Nazis were the actual all powerful perpetrators and it was the Nazis who were the victims.



Iranian style misogynist billboards are now appearing in Kabul for the first time. They include messages where women are compared to half eaten candies, exposed to greedy flies. The message in the image says, “No one likes the leftover food of flies.”

Pro-hijab organizations and states always insist that what sets them apart is their respect for women. But as we can see from their campaigns, the opposite is true. Far from being respected, both men and women are treated with breath-taking disdain. What kind of dignity is there in public campaigns where human beings are compared to insects and fruits and vegetables?

I have chosen these examples to illustrate that when we judge the merits of hijab based on debates in English alone, we only see one side of the story. We see a sanitized version of the debate with arguments carefully crafted to appeal to our liberal values. We don’t see rotten fruit and half eaten candies and ferocious flies. Only those of us who are blessed with bilingualism see this other side. This other side exists. There is this other public sphere which is much more powerful because this is where native languages are deployed to shame and terrorize women into submitting to wearing the hijab. As soon as we enter this other public sphere, democracy and individual rights disappear. Instead, what reveals itself is the bullying methods of a totalitarian theocracy, unashamedly denying women their human dignity, their individuality.



Children are not immune to the propaganda. This poster reads “Our children are safer with hijab.”

In campaign after campaign, women are depicted as rotten food, as half eaten sweets, or as untrustworthy temptresses who need to be covered up and more importantly, as murderers and criminals. The hysteria over the female hair is breathtaking, making us wonder: if women’s bare heads are the cause of chaos and anarchy, how come today we see more war and conflict in the Muslim world than we do in Western democracies where women don’t cover their hair?

We need to ask ourselves, if hijab is a choice and even more bizarrely, as clerics claim, ‘natural’,

then, how come so much money, time and effort is going into vast and persistent campaigns of persuasion with global reach? How come the time and money spent on these campaigns is not spent on female healthcare, for example?

Ultimately, we, who live in the 21st century, know that blaming women for men's behavior is not only superstitious nonsense but also a weapon that protects patriarchy by making women responsible for the bad behavior of men. In other words, this view is a hangover from the dark ages of gender relations. It goes without saying that women everywhere should have the right to choose whether or not they wear the hijab. If they have no option to choose, then, the talk of choice is all but an illusion. Ask yourself, if women are terrorized, insulted, and demeaned for not wearing the hijab, then, is there really a choice? The answer is simple. No, there isn't.

Nushin Arbabzadah

P.S.

* <http://www.freewomenwriters.org/covering-up-sanitized-and-sinister-campaigns-of-persuasion/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oINNtV8dKLU>