

Wear a Hijab Day (United States): As Muslim women, we actually ask you not to wear the hijab in the name of interfaith solidarity

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Last week, three female religious leaders — a Jewish rabbi, an Episcopal vicar and a Unitarian reverend — and a male imam, or Muslim prayer leader, walked into the sacred space in front of the ornately-tiled minbar, or pulpit, at the Khadeeja Islamic Center in West Valley City, Utah. The women were smiling widely, their hair covered with swaths of bright scarves, to support “Wear a Hijab” day.

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The Salt Lake Tribune [published a photo](#) of fresh-faced teenage girls, who were not Muslim, in the audience at the mosque, their hair covered with long scarves. [KSL TV](#) later reported: “The hijab — or headscarf — is a symbol of modesty and dignity. When Muslim women wear headscarves, they are readily identified as followers of Islam.”

For us, as mainstream Muslim women, born in Egypt and India, the spectacle at the mosque was a painful reminder of the well-financed effort by conservative Muslims to dominate modern Muslim societies. This modern-day movement spreads an ideology of political Islam, called “Islamism,” enlisting well-intentioned interfaith do-gooders and the media into promoting the idea that “hijab” is a virtual “sixth pillar” of Islam, after the traditional “five pillars” of the shahada (or proclamation of faith), prayer, fasting, charity and pilgrimage.

We reject this interpretation that the “hijab” is merely a symbol of modesty and dignity adopted by faithful female followers of Islam.

This modern-day movement, codified by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Taliban Afghanistan and the Islamic State, has erroneously made the Arabic word hijab synonymous with “headscarf.” This conflation of hijab with the secular word headscarf is misleading. “Hijab” literally means “curtain” in Arabic. It also means “hiding,” “obstructing” and “isolating” someone or something. It is never used in the Koran to mean headscarf.

In colloquial Arabic, the word for “headscarf” is tarha. In classical Arabic, “head” is al-ra’as and cover is gheta’a. No matter what formula you use, “hijab” never means headscarf. The media must stop spreading this misleading interpretation.

Born in the 1960s into conservative but open-minded families (Hala in Egypt and Asra in India), we grew up without an edict that we had to cover our hair. But, starting in the 1980s, following the 1979 Iranian revolution of the minority Shiite sect and the rise of well-funded Saudi clerics from the majority Sunni sect, we have been bullied in an attempt to get us to cover our hair from men and boys. Women and girls, who are sometimes called “enforce-hers” and “Muslim mean girls,” take it a step further by even making fun of women whom they perceive as wearing the hijab inappropriately, referring to “hijabis” in skinny jeans as “ho-jabis,” using the indelicate term for “whores.”

But in interpretations from the 7th century to today, theologians, from the late Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi to UCLA’s Khaled Abou El Fadl, and Harvard’s Leila Ahmed, Egypt’s Zaki Badawi, Iraq’s Abdullah al Judai and Pakistan’s Javaid Ghamidi, have clearly established that Muslim women are not required to cover their hair.

Challenging the hijab

To us, the “hijab” is a symbol of an interpretation of Islam we reject that believes that women are a sexual distraction to men, who are weak, and thus must not be tempted by the sight of our hair. We don’t buy it. This ideology promotes a social attitude that absolves men of sexually harassing women and puts the onus on the victim to protect herself by covering up.

The new Muslim Reform Movement, a global network of leaders, advocating for human rights, peace and secular governance, supports the right of Muslim women to wear — or not wear — the headscarf.

Unfortunately, the idea of “hijab” as a mandatory headscarf is promulgated by naïve efforts such as “[World Hijab Day](#),” started in 2013 by Nazma Khan, the Bangladeshi American owner of a Brooklyn-based headscarf company, and [Ahlul Bayt](#), a Shiite-proselytizing TV station, that the University of Calgary, in southwest Canada, promotes as a resource for its participation in “World Hijab Day.” The TV station argues that wearing a “hijab” is necessary for women to avoid “unwanted attention.” World Hijab Day, Ahlul Bayt and the University of Calgary didn’t respond to requests for comment.

In its “[resources](#),” Ahlul Bayt includes a link to the notion that “[the woman is awrah](#),” or forbidden, an idea that leads to the confinement, subordination, silencing and subjugation of women’s voices and presence in public society. It also includes an [article](#), “The top 10 excuses of Muslim women who don’t wear hijab and their obvious weaknesses,” with the argument, “Get on the train of repentance, my sister, before it passes by your station.”

The rush to cover women’s hair has reached a fever pitch with ultraconservative Muslim websites and organizations pushing this interpretation, such as [VirtualMosque.com](#) and [Al-Islam.org](#), which even published a [feature](#), “Hijab Jokes,” mocking Muslim women who don’t cover their hair “Islamically.”

Last week, high school girls at Vernon Hills High School, outside Chicago, wore headscarves for an activity, “[Walk a Mile in Her Hijab](#),” sponsored by the school’s conservative Muslim Students Association. It disturbed us to see the image of the girls in scarves.

Furthermore, Muslim special-interest groups are feeding articles about “[Muslim women in hijab](#)” under siege. Staff members at the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which has pressed legal and PR complaints against U.S. companies that have barred employees from wearing hijabs on the job, has even called their organization “the hijab legal defense fund.”

Today, in the 21st century, most mosques around the world, including in the United States, deny us, as Muslim women, our Islamic right to pray without a headscarf, discriminating against us by refusing us entry if we don't cover our hair. Like the Catholic Church after the Vatican II reforms of 1965 removed a requirement that women enter churches with heads covers, mosques should become headscarf-optional, if they truly want to make their places of worship "[women-friendly](#)."

Fortunately, we have those courageous enough to challenge these edicts. In early May 2014, an Iranian journalist, Masih Alinejad, started a brave new campaign, [#MyStealthyFreedom](#), to protest laws requiring women to wear hijabs that Iran's theocracy put in place after it won control in 1979. The campaign's slogan: "The right for individual Iranian women to choose whether they want hijab."

Important interpretations of the Koran

The mandate that women cover their hair relies on misinterpretations of Koranic verses.

In Arabic dictionaries, hijab refers to a "barrier," not necessarily between men and women, but also between two men. Hijab appears in a Koranic verse (33:53), during the fifth year of the prophet Muhammad's migration, or hijra, to Medina, when some wedding guests overstayed their welcome at the prophet's home. It established some rules of etiquette for speaking to the wives of prophet Muhammad: "And when ye ask of them anything, ask it of them from behind a hijab. This is purer for your hearts and for their hearts." Thus, hijab meant a partition.

The word hijab, or a derivative, appears only eight times in the Koran as an "obstacle" or "wall of separation" (7:46), a "curtain" (33:53), "hidden" (38:32), just a "wall of separation" (41:5, 42:52, 17:45), "hiding" (19:14) and "prevented" or "denied access to God" (83:15).

In the Koran, the word hijab never connotes any act of piety. Rather, it carries the negative connotation of being an actual or metaphorical obstacle separating the "non-believers" in a dark place, noting "our hearts are under hijab (41:5)," for example, a wall of separation between those in heaven and those in hell (7:46) or "Surely, they will be mahjaboon from seeing their Lord that day (83:15)." Mahjaboon is a derivate verb from hijab. The Saudi Koran translates it as "veiled." Actually, in this usage, it means, "denied access."

The most cited verse to defend the headscarf (33:59) states, "Oh, Prophet tell thy wives and thy daughters and the believer women to draw their jilbab close around them; this will be better so that they be recognized and not harmed and God is the most forgiving, most merciful." According to Arabic dictionaries, jilbab means "long, overflowing gown" which was the traditional dress at the time. The verse does not instruct them to add a new garment but rather adjust an existing one. It also does not mean headscarf.

Disturbingly, the government of Saudi Arabia twists its translation of the verse to impose face veils on women, allowing them even to see with just "one eye." The government's translation reads: "O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies (i.e. screen themselves completely except the eyes or one eye to see the way). That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not to be annoyed, and God is most forgiving, most merciful."

Looked at in context, Islamic historians say this verse was revealed in the city of Medina, where the prophet Muhammad fled to escape persecution in Mecca, and was revealed to protect women from rampant sexual aggression they faced on the streets of Medina, where men often sexually harassed women, particularly slaves. Today, we have criminal codes that make such crimes illegal; countries

that don't have such laws need to pass them, rather than punishing women for the violent acts of others.

Another verse (24:31) is also widely used to justify a headscarf, stating, "... and tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and do not reveal their adornment except what is already shown; and draw their khemar over their neck. . . ."

In old Arabic poetry, the khemar was a fancy silk scarf worn by affluent women. It was fixed on the middle of the head and thrown over their back, as a means of seducing men and flaunting their wealth. This verse was revealed at a time, too, when women faced harassment when they used open-air toilets. The verse also instructs how to wear an existing traditional garment. It doesn't impose a new one.

Reclaiming our religion

In 1919, Egyptian women marched on the streets demanding the right to vote; they took off their veils, imported as a cultural tradition from the Ottoman Empire, not a religious edict. The veil then became a relic of the past.

Later, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser said in a speech in the early 1960s that, when he sought reconciliation with members of the Muslim Brotherhood group for attempting to assassinate him in 1954, the Supreme Leader of the Brotherhood gave him a list of demands, including, "imposing hijab on Egyptian women." The audience members didn't understand what the word hijab meant. When Nasser explained that the Brotherhood wanted Egyptian women to wear a headscarf, the audience members burst out laughing.

As women who grew up in modern Muslim families with theologians, we are trying to reclaim our religion from the prongs of a strict interpretation. Like in our youth, we are witnessing attempts to make this strict ideology the one and only accepted face of Islam. We have seen what the resurgence of political Islam has done to our regions of origin and to our adoptive country.

As Americans, we believe in freedom of religion. But we need to clarify to those in universities, the media and discussion forums that in exploring the "hijab," they are not exploring Islam, but rather the ideology of political Islam as practiced by the mullahs, or clerics, of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic State.

In the name of "interfaith," these well-intentioned Americans are getting duped by the agenda of Muslims who argue that a woman's honor lies in her "chastity" and unwittingly pushing a platform to put a hijab on every woman.

Please do this instead: Do not wear a headscarf in "solidarity" with the ideology that most silences us, equating our bodies with "honor." Stand with us instead with moral courage against the ideology of Islamism that demands we cover our hair.

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P.S.

- The Washington Post. December 21, 2015:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/21/as-muslim-women-we-actually-as-k-you-not-to-wear-the-hijab-in-the-name-of-interfaith-solidarity/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1def07f2aa37

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