

Points of View on the Hijab

Interview with **Sultan** (24), Belgian Muslim of Turkish origin, living in Diest, Belgium. Interviewed by Yolanda Cieters, Wednesday August 31, 2005.

"I have always learned that Islam requires wearing a hijab [headscarf]. But, nobody has the right to force you in doing this. Each human being has to be free in choosing to follow the obligations of Islam. You do this for Allah, our God, not because somebody else asks you to do it. There are, though, parents, husbands and parents-in-law who oblige girls to wear a headscarf.

"Personally, I don't wear a headscarf. I don't feel ready for it. I first want to know better all other rules in Islam and apply them. I think only then I'd feel ready to wear the hijab, which is after all one of the most visible expressions of Islam. A ban on headscarves is not at all a protection. It is a non-democratic restriction. I am in favor of freedom. A person has the right to express his/her religion as long as you don't harm the society. At school the hijab wasn't obliged in the past and it has never posed a problem. The school is 'the' place in society where children from different cultures and religions get together. The school plays a pivotal role in the integration process of minorities. A ban on headscarves sends a very negative message to the students."

Interview with **Fatma** (20) and **Fouzia Hadjidj** (26), two sisters of Algerian origin, both Muslim, living in Choisy-le-Roi, a neighborhood near Paris. Interviewed by Yolanda Cieters, Wednesday August 31, 2005.

Is the hijab/head-scarf a religious obligation?

Fatma: Yes, it is.

Fouzia: No, it isn't.

You're sisters, both Muslims, but you have a different perspective on whether it is obligatory or not...

Fatma: Let's ask our father...

Father: No, the hijab is not a religious obligation. In principle Islam requires to dress modestly and to cover the head and shoulders, but this is not a rule as such. Depending on the context you are living in, and in our case, the

customs in France, Muslims have a valid reason not to wear it.

You don't wear a headscarf, not at home, nor at work or at school. Why not?

Fatma and Fouzia: We haven't been raised by our parents with that custom. We don't have the habit to wear it. Our mother (housewife) wears it though.

Many of your friends wear a headscarf. What is their main reason for wearing it?

Fatma and Fouzia: In the first place out of religious belief, but also because they are often required to wear it by their family. Many parents want their children to preserve the customs of the parents. Very often it is also a way to identify themselves as being Muslim.

Do you perceive the banning of headscarves in public schools in France as a restriction of the freedom of choice or as a protection against oppression?

Fatma: Although I have never worn a headscarf, I do perceive this measure as a restriction of the freedom of choice.

Fouzia: I don't agree. I don't think it is a wrong measure. It will surely encourage the integration of Muslims in France.

Justin Vaisse, Affiliated Scholar, Brookings Center on the U.S. and Europe, at a PEW event entitled "The Veil Controversy: International Perspectives on Religion in Public Life." Source: <http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=55>

"Why do some French girls, teenagers, choose to wear the veil? ...There are at least four or five different meanings...

"Of course the wearing of the scarf can be the articulation of a free belief, the expression of a true religious commitment... The problem in schools begins only when this religious commitment is conceived more as a sort of teenager identity formation, almost teenager rebellion...

"A second case is the headscarf is sometimes worn as a protection against machismo of fathers and brothers...

"A third case in the wearing of the veil can be, unfortunately, that it's simply imposed by parents...

"A fourth case is less pleasant. It's when Islamist groups try to influence families...What here must be understood is that it has become a common strategy for a few fundamentalist groups to test the French republic on this battleground of schools..."

Naheed Mustafa, a Canadian Muslim, graduated from the University of Toronto in 1992 with an honors degree in political and history. In islamfortoday.com. Source: <http://www.islamfortoday.com/hijabcanada2.htm>

"...Why would I, a woman with all the advantages of a North American upbringing, suddenly, at 21, want to cover myself so that, with the hijab and the other clothes I choose to wear, only my face and hands show? Because it gives me freedom. ...

"It is simply a woman's assertion that judgment of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction....

"Women are not going to achieve equality with the right to bear their breasts in public, as some people would like to have you believe...

"True equality will be had only when women don't need to display themselves to get attention and won't need to defend their decision to keep their bodies to themselves."

Mary C. Ali, article published by The Institute of Islamic Information and Education and reproduced in electronic form by Islamic Academy for Scientific Research.

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/humanrelations/womeninislam/whatishijab.html>

"Why do Muslim women have to cover their heads? ... The answer to the question is very simple. Muslim women observe 'hijab' (covering the head and the body) because *Allah* has told them to do so...

"For both men and women, clothing requirements are not meant to be a restriction but rather a way in which society will function in a proper, Islamic manner..."

Cheryl Bernard, senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, speaking on NPR's program "Day to Day", Wednesday March 17, 2004:
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1773933>

"You have very different kinds of women wearing the scarf. You have traditional or older women, especially in immigrant communities who just grew up wearing it ever since childhood... Then, you have young people, teenagers, or young adults, women who wear it, some because they are trying to rediscover their religion and they do legitimately believe that the head cover is required...."

"It is not a religious obligation in the Quran. There are a couple of passages in the Quran that touch on issues of dress. One of them stresses that men and women should dress modestly, but it doesn't specify what modest means. The other is a paragraph that refers specifically to the wives and family members of the prophet during his life time. The paragraph makes it clear that the purpose of that rule is to distinguish them from all other women. To apply this rule to all Muslim women is contrary to its obvious intention..."

Abir Meskin, a Muslim 17 year old schoolgirl from Saint-Denis, France on NPR's program "All things considered", Thursday September 2, 2004, the first day of the ban on "conspicuous" religious apparel.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3886467>

"...It is too bad. For me the principle of secularism is to respect all religions. It is not to try to deny their existence. So, I take my veil off because I want an education. But it pains me to do so..."

Patrick Weil, member of the presidential commission to study the implementation of the principle of laïcité (secularism) in the French Republic. Article entitled "A nation in Diversity: France, Muslims and the headscarf," in "Open Democracy," 25/03/2004, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-5-57-1811.jsp>

"...In the last two to three years, it has become clear that in schools where some Muslim girls do wear the headscarf and others do not, there is strong pressure on the latter to 'conform.' This daily pressure takes different forms, from insults to violence...

"After we heard the evidence, we concluded that we faced a difficult choice with respect to young Muslim girls wearing the headscarf in state schools. Either we left the situation as it was, and thus supported a situation that denied freedom of choice to those – the very large majority – who do not want to wear the headscarf; or we endorsed a law that removed freedom of choice from those who do want to wear it...

"We decided to give freedom of choice to the former during the time they were in school, while the latter retain all their freedom for their life outside school...."