The Girl in the Hijab

Contemporary Feminist Perspectives

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The image of a young girl wearing a hijab can be seen to be an iconic representation of the complex intersection between feminism on the one hand, and religion and culture on the other. While the hijab is a visible marker of traditional gender norms in some Islamic communities, many modern Muslim women and girls have reclaimed it as a symbol of faith, identity, and choice. In keeping with contemporary feminist dialogue, we seek to understand and respect these nuanced perspectives.

Western feminism has not always accommodated the voices of Muslim women. Early feminist movements often critiqued patriarchal religious traditions without appreciating the diversity of thought and experience in communities viewed as other. However, contemporary intersectional feminism recognizes that women face overlapping systems of power and oppression related to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other identity markers. It emphasizes inclusivity and the validity of both individual agency and collective cultural identities.

Given this framework, the girl in the hijab cannot be viewed reductively as either a victim of oppression or the face of a monolithic culture. Young Muslim women and girls have a multiplicity of views on the hijab’s meaning and role in their lives. For some, donning it is a sacred religious duty and a symbol of piety. For others, it represents a cultural tradition but not a divine mandate. Some feel pressured to wear it by family members or society, while others choose it freely as an expression of their faith. As feminists, we must acknowledge this diversity of experience and affirm every woman’s right to define her own identity.

While critical analysis of power structures is still needed, this should be considered thoughtfully. Structural forces like patriarchal gender norms,
racism, and poverty undeniably shape the options available to minoritized women but, at the same time, these women are agents who make reasoned choices within their social contexts. In any attempt to balance internal and external motivations for veiling in contemporary feminism, open dialogue and empathy on all sides is key in this necessarily ongoing discussion.

Centering women’s own accounts is vital for ethical engagement across differences. This is not a new practice; more than a decade ago Sumbul Ali-Karamali, in her memoir, *Growing up Muslim* (2012) aimed at teens and young adults, discusses her faith and identity with its challenges, questions, and convictions along with its joys. Almost twenty years ago, the personal essays in *Living Islam Out Loud* (2005), edited by Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, feature Muslim women reflecting on stereotypes, spirituality, activism, and more. Importantly, these narratives come from women themselves rather than from outsider interpretations. Asra Q. Nomani’s *Milestones for a Spiritual Jihad: Toward an Islam of Grace* (2010) also comes to mind here. As Nomani, a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent, put it then,

> For too long, I have observed that we have abandoned spiritual enlightenment for ritual prayer and dogma. This is a struggle that has challenged all faiths. And just as other religions have gone through transformations, I believe a new approach to Islam can become normative, reshaping Muslim communities and public policy and allowing us to realize a global dream in which all religious communities can be models for tolerance, pluralism, and social justice. It is time that we rise to a higher expression of Islam, create a new reality, and reclaim the principles of social justice, women’s rights, pluralism, and tolerance with which Islam was born. (n.p.)

Muslim and non-Muslim feminists alike desire greater freedom, dignity, and fulfillment for all women, so building connections through shared aspirations is another promising endeavor that has an old and well-established precedent. Amina Wadud, a Muslim theologian who chooses not to capitalize her names because Arabic does not use capital letters, emphasizes Islam’s egalitarian origins in interpreting the Qur’an through a feminist lens. Born into a Methodist family, she converted to Islam when she was 20 years of age. Close to three decades ago, in a major break with Muslim practice and tradition, Wadud delivered a Friday *khutbah* (sermon) on “Islam as Engaged Surrender” at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1994.1 On Friday 18 March 2005, Wadud acted as imam for a congregation of women and men seated together, without any gender separation. The call to prayer was given by another woman, Suheyla El-Attar. This was sponsored by the Muslim Women’s Freedom Tour, under the lead-
ership of Asra Nomani, the website Muslim WakeUp!, and by members of the Progressive Muslim Union.

Although differing in views, secular feminists and faith-rooted Muslim feminists share core goals like educational access, economic empowerment, political voice, and control over one's body and future. There is room for coalition-building around these common aims.

The girl in the hijab reminds us that feminism must continually expand its perspectives and employ relevant tools to embrace diversity. Listening to women's own experiences, examining nuance, finding humanity in differences, and connecting through shared hopes will strengthen understanding and solidarity across cultures. The hijab sits at a complex intersection of identity and society. Contemporary feminism seeks wisdom, empathy, and justice in navigating these layers and thus creating a new future for girls and women of all backgrounds.

To sum up, we must emphasize contemporary feminism’s recognition of intersectionality and the validity of both individual agency and collective cultural identities for women. We must recognize that Muslim women have a diversity of views on the meaning of the hijab, and, as feminists, we must acknowledge this range of experience. While acknowledging that critical analysis of power structures affecting some Muslim women is still needed, this should be done thoughtfully while advocating for centering Muslim women’s own narratives and building connections through shared aspirations, rather than by imposing outside judgments. We argue for nuance over generalization, and empathy over judgment as we affirm Muslim women’s and girls’ autonomy, diversity of thought, and participation in the feminist movement.

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**References**


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