

Redefining Modesty: Unveiling the Truth Behind the Portrayal of Muslim Women

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As I rode the bus home from school, I noticed a woman completely hidden by modest clothing, from head to toe. The other passengers' visibly felt uneasy as she boarded the bus, but unlike them, her presence inspired me. Her bravery and resilience in maintaining her modesty resonated with me, as a fellow hijabi who understands the subtle forms of exclusion and presumptions that Muslim women encounter. It was then that I questioned society's understanding of our modest choices.

Do they truly grasp the decision and courage underlying our choice of modesty?

Apparently not.

For Muslims, modesty reflects a large part of cultural and religious values instilled from a young age. Modesty teaches to maintain self-respect and dignity, emphasizing not only clothing choices but also mannerisms and behavior. In truth, it fosters a sense of devotion and piety, enhancing spiritual connection. It is crucial to recognize that modesty is a personal preference for both Muslim women and men, different from oppression. Rather, it can enable women to take ownership of their bodies and defy societal norms of objectification and beauty.

There is a stark difference in perspectives regarding Islamic modest wear. Critics claim that Islamic modest wear is sexist since it seems to specifically target women. However, this stance overlooks the fact that modest clothing is also required of men. [Islamic teachings state that](#) “men must cover from their navel to their knees” just as women “must cover all of themselves except their hands and face,” conveying that “male modesty in practice is relatively similar to female modesty.” Modesty is truly a universal principle in behavior and attire, expected of both men and women as a show of respect for themselves and others.

While Western feminism promotes complete gender equality, this stance faces challenges within Islam. Islamic teachings prioritize equity over equality, bringing a sense of balance between men and women by the equitable division of rights and obligations. Rather than pursuing uniform treatment and the theoretical concept of equality, Islam highlights the importance of practical equity in attaining equality.

Recent studies and analyses have explored the experiences and challenges faced by modest Muslim women in Western societies. Zahra Aljabri’s [“Modesty Does Not Equal Oppression.”](#) delves into the misconceptions surrounding the concept of modesty within Islam by

the West. One of these assumptions equates dressing modestly to being oppressed, a perspective that Aljabri finds degrading. She reveals that as a Muslim, she often comes across individuals who assume she is being “forced” to dress modestly, implying that she lacks “independent reason[ing]” for her choice. This assumption enforces the false narrative that Muslim women have no freedom of choice in their religion. The shallow and narrow-minded view of modesty in Muslim women hurts them and disregards their ability to think and act independently.

Rania Rizvi explores the difference in societal treatment by mainstream media when it comes to pop star Billie Eilish and Muslim women concerning their choice of modesty. In [“The Double Standard Between Billie Eilish And Muslim Women”](#) Eilish is commended for her fashionably modest clothing, even recognized for being a “symbol of female empowerment” due to her “resistance of a culture [that] feels entitled to women’s...bodies.” On the other hand, Muslim women are labeled as backward or regressive for making the same choices, doing it way before it was considered fashionable. This double standard demonstrates society’s praise for Eilish’s modest choice of clothing while simultaneously devaluing Muslim women who choose to do the same.

Dr. Aisha Jadoon, an Associate Head of the Humanities department at COMSATS University, Islamabad, further examines damaging stereotypes in her [feminist analysis of Shelina Zahra Janmohamed’s book, “Love in a Headscarf \(2010\)”](#). She challenges the idea that modesty restricts Muslim women’s ability to assert themselves in society, arguing that the Western media and political perception of the veil have been at the forefront of disapproval of Muslim women’s modest attire. Influential Western political leaders have consistently expressed their concern for Muslim women, viewing them as “oppressed covered women.” This in turn has led to the rise of hate crimes, such as “incidences of abuse, both physical and verbal” against Muslim women.

Jadoon voices the dangers that come with spreading misinformation and misrepresentations of Muslim women by popular and political figures. She states that “the propagation of misconceptions...about veiled Muslim women by popular and political figures” has “become exponentially problematic for Muslim women living in Western societies.” This perspective sheds light on the corrupt narrative that the West has pushed, portraying them as oppressed. In the end, the misconceptions targeted at Muslim women affect them tremendously, undermining the public appearance of these women, which is a core aspect of their identity. Jadoon’s insight resonates strongly, particularly when mentioning the role and actions of politicians, popular figures, and the media disregarding reasons for dressing modestly. This, in turn, is seen as a major contributing cause to the rise and fueling of Islamophobia.

In an effort to gather diverse perspectives and opinions regarding the topic of modest Muslim women and their portrayal within the media, a series of interviews were conducted with women who shared their thoughts and encounters. Mona Shadded, a hijabi herself, gave perspectives about modest Muslim women. She shared her daily experience of frequently dealing with disapproving stares while in public. Despite this challenge, Shadded followed up by stressing that: “The hijab or other forms of modest clothing isn’t oppressive. It’s a choice that I make as a Muslim woman every day—it truly keeps me close to God...” This was one of the most frequent answers from other interviewees as well, all voicing how it's their choice, not anyone else’s say.

“It’s definitely a struggle sometimes, especially with the lack of media coverage on women that look like me.” Shadded also expressed her frustration with the lack of positive media coverage of veiled Muslim women. “I don’t see too much positive mainstream media coverage on Muslim women, unless, of course, it’s related to politics or misrepresents the community...”

It could be argued that recently the [“Western media \[has\] increased their diversity in displaying Muslim-identified characters on the big screen.”](#) And while that may be true, with shows like “Hala” and “Elite” that attempt to foster a broader spectrum of Muslim narratives in society, in reality, actual Muslims often find it misleading and feel they aren't accurately portrayed. “Those types of shows truly misrepresent us...it is always the same storyline...” Mona says with a laugh, “With a white dude coming in to ‘save’ a brown Muslim girl from her religion...” It can be said that Western media always has a way of [“depicting Muslims with some form of oppression...with a particular emphasis on women.”](#)

Alternatively, Sharmin Rodella—another participant interviewed—gave a different perspective on modest Muslim women in the media, which differs from Shaded's. Rodella also recounts that she does not see Muslim women in the media much except in politics or when it has some damaging motive behind the coverage. “Throughout the years, I've begun to see Muslim women come up in the news whenever bans against their modest attire show up.” She says, “Take France as an example. There is always some sort of ban against Muslim modest wear, with [recent bans involving abayas](#), a “long, flowing dress” commonly worn by some Muslim women. Rodella shares that France's government had shortly announced the ban before schools reopened earlier during the year. “I read that Muslim girls were no longer allowed to wear the abaya at school just because it ‘violated’ the country's principle of secularism...”

This draws attention to the ongoing debates surrounding the portrayal and treatment of modest Muslims in the media and society. “Being bombarded with media that often mentions Muslim women in events like bans and whatnot leads people to believe it, including me” Rodella says. Do not blame her for this because false narratives affect billions of people. However,

Rodella emphasizes that after doing her research, digging deeper into Islam, and speaking with young Muslim girls, she was able to understand that the media was not telling the whole truth.

It begs the question: who's to say the public won't begin to believe in this corrupted narrative that demonizes and stigmatizes the hijab and other modest clothing, labeling it as repressive?

The media's portrayal of modest Muslim women significantly contributes to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, widespread prejudice, and Islamophobia. A [study done by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding \(ISPU\)](#) found that 70% of Muslim women who wear hijab or niqab have experienced discrimination and harassment in public spaces. This concerning statistic emphasizes how critical for greater understanding and acceptance of modest Muslims in the West. Clearly, there is a definite effect that misrepresented media coverage portraying Muslim women has lasting effects, even leading to the rise of Islamophobia.

Ultimately, it is critical to address and dismantle damaging narratives surrounding modest Muslim women if we are to build inclusive and diverse societies. So, the next time you encounter stereotypes and portrayals of Muslim women in the media, refrain from allowing the media to think for you. To find the truth, take the initiative to question, research, and build connections. Let us not forget that behind these fabricated narratives are people with lives.

Supporting [organizations](#) that strive to “create ‘value based’ content to counter negative views of Islam and Muslims...” and “provide a powerful voice for Muslims” is one way to help this cause. We can work toward a society where we elevate and respect the voices of Muslim women by recognizing the freedom and choice they possess as well as advocate for more inclusivity within the media.

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