How has being a first-generation Muslim woman in America impacted your life?

From a South Asian perspective.

Disclaimer: This post is from a perspective of a woman who does not wear a hijab. Women who do wear a hijab might or might not have had the same experiences.

Image by CreatorsProject on Twitter

So how has it impacted your life? I'll go first. It's been quite a journey. As a young woman who does not cover her hair but still likes to follow the modesty of her religion, I get a lot of furrowed eyebrows and confused faces looking at me when the sentence "Yes, I'm a Muslim" comes out of my mouth, which I understand because the media has either associated us with covering ourselves as a sign of oppression or terrorism. The truth is that we're neither. There's a spectrum of leniency in Islam regarding every issue but just like every other religion some people are extremists who follow their own made up rules and others choose to mix our South Asian culture claiming it to be religion, regardless of what these people do it eventually comes down to regular people like us who are still trying to make it to the top to live our American dream that our immigrant parents came here for, while still desperately trying to hold on to our cultural and religious values.

As I mentioned before I choose not to wear the hijab for several reasons the main one being not being confident enough to look different than the rest around me but there are some religious values that I keep close to my heart and practice them such as praying regularly, not drinking alcohol or doing drugs and having intimate relationships. Because I don't look like a typical Muslim who covers, people around

me, even other Pakistanis just assume I'm not religious at all which leads to a lot of miscommunication and uncomfortable conversations one example being an interaction I had my first year of college. I met a Pakistani guy who sat next to me in English class and we eventually partnered up to work together which led to exchanging numbers and so on. He seemed like a pretty decent guy and the more I got to know him, I found out that he just moved here a couple years ago and was still adjusting to the environment. When the topic of religion came up he told me that he was steering away from Islam and it's values and he just didn't seem to believe in it, he rather believed in science and wanted an explanation for things which was other than "because God said so" which I respect, in all honesty. The topic switched over to me and I told him that I was pretty religious and did believe in god very much and his immediate response was "oh, but you don't look religious." and to which I responded I don't have to look religious to be it. I've had this converstaion multiple times with multiple people so I did not think much of this one either. Weeks went by and the conversations from this guy were getting weirder and more flirtatious. He would touch me here and then while casually laughing or start walking way too close to me. I told him multiple times that I was uncomfortable with what he was doing and he would just laugh it off in an apology. I felt like I was being humiliated and laughed at. Eventually, the semester came to an end and he finally addressed the elephant in the room which was that he wanted to be with, which kind of took me by surprise because I gave him no indication of such a thing. For a second, I thought that maybe I unconsciously invited this attention towards me when I didn't mean to but just to clarify I told him that I was religious and I don't do all these things and out of all people he should know that, and what came next angered me to the point that it left me speechless. He responded by saying "yeah I know you told me that but you don't look religious or anything so I though you could try something new and I'll be your first". I felt humiliated, shamed and embarrassed to even call him my friend at some point. I finally gathered up the courage to stand up to him and tell him to not belittle me or what I believe in just because he does not and because he does not think I match the criteria for having certain beliefs.

What I'm trying to say is that we're all trying. Trying to fit in or trying to steer away from peer pressure so we don't have to fit in. The key word being trying, I'm trying as well, to be a good practicing Muslim who can eventually be confident enough to wear the hijab as well. If you see someone trying to practice their beliefs don't shame

them for it, don't shame them for not being perfect at it because the truth it that none of us are perfect at anything. Instead, encourage them, give them kind words and motivation even if you hold different beliefs and values.