Chapter 1

Purdah: Is the Practice of Female Seclusion and Wearing Hijab Oppressive to Women or an Expression of Their Identity?

Key Terms: cultural imperialism, discrimination, gender stratification, hijab, human rights, oppression, patriarchal society, purdah

INTRODUCTION

When a woman is covered, men cannot judge her by her appearance but are forced to evaluate her by her personality, character, and morals. “The hijab is not a responsibility, it’s a right given to me by my Creator who knows us best. It’s a benefit to me, so why not? It’s something every woman should strive to get and should want.” A North American Muslim woman who chooses to veil, quoted in Barr, Clark, & Marsh (n.d.).

The image of an Afghan woman hurrying through the streets draped from head to toe in voluminous folds of thick blue cloth, with not even her eyes visible, resonates among Westerners. These women are wearing hijab, a full body covering, and observing the ancient custom of purdah or female seclusion. To Westerners, purdah and hijab are symbols of female subjugation and oppression, tangible evidence that women in Muslim societies are treated like second-class citizens, forever submissive and secluded from the public eye. But is this an accurate assessment, or a remnant of colonialist perceptions of all things non-Western? Do women who follow purdah and wear hijab consider themselves oppressed, and what, if any, differences are there in the way the practices of purdah and hijab are viewed and applied from one culture to another?

In this chapter we will address gender stratification through the age-old practices of purdah and hijab, or what is commonly called veiling.1 We will explore human sexuality as it pertains to these practices, as well as the historical, religious, and socio-cultural implications of purdah and hijab. Since purdah is both religious and cultural, the degree to which they are practised and their meaning(s) often vary, depending on differing internal and external factors, including religious piety, socio-economic class, familial expectations,

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1 Veiling is the term Muslims use when referring to wearing a head scarf.
political agendas, and cultural mores. For this reason we will cross-culturally examine the practice in Palestine, Iran, and Afghanistan, as well as more briefly in countries such as Egypt. As people from Muslim states migrate to other countries, the issue of human rights and purdah, and the meaning of choice itself, becomes more complex. We will consider the challenges faced by people who wish to continue purdah and hijab while those around them disapprove.

Anthropologists, as well as other social scientists, have grown increasingly conscious of a new voice in the study of humankind – that of the people being studied. In this case, the thoughts of women who follow purdah and wear various forms of hijab, as well as women who choose not to wear hijab, will be heard, as it is their interpretation that is most relevant. Internet sources are drawn upon extensively, since it is here, rather than in academic papers, that Muslim women have found a timely and effective forum for expressing their views on the experience and meaning of purdah and hijab.

An insider’s (or emic) perspective from social scientists also lends an added dimension to the study of purdah. For example, Homa Hoodfar is a Canadian anthropologist of Iranian descent who has focused her research on the experience of veiled Muslim women. She draws on historical accounts and anthropological data, as well as her personal perspective as a Muslim woman, to understand the practice. Finally, this chapter not only considers whether purdah and hijab are oppressive but also examines the perception of oppression that many Westerners hold.

**THE NATURE OF PURDAH AND HIJAB**

Just as the concept of gender is a cultural construct, so is gender stratification culturally defined. **Gender stratification** refers to inequality between men and women, based on their access to wealth and resources, power and self-determination, and the prestige and status afforded to each gender. Thus, the social and political positions that women hold in a culture, the economic independence they are able to achieve, and the decision-making power they have over their own lives and bodies are all indicators of gender equality, or the lack thereof. Some degree of female gender stratification exists in all modern-day societies; the question here is whether purdah exemplifies a form of gender stratification.

The Persian word purdah means curtain (Khan 1999); it can also mean screen or veil (Arnett 2001). Most people associate purdah with clothing that covers a woman; this is really veiling or hijab (see below), while purdah is a more general term for the seclusion of women, whether beneath concealing clothing or isolation in their homes. Although people outside the Muslim faith and culture may view purdah as repressive, to many Muslims, following purdah symbolizes the importance of feminine modesty and purity, and reflects positively on the family. These women are following the Qur’an (24: 30–31), which states: “And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands.”

The modest covering of a woman’s head and body is known as hijab or veiling. Hijab comes from the Arabic word hajaba, meaning to hide or conceal from view (Ali n.d.). If a woman does not wear her veil in the presence of a man then she considers him kin (MacLeod 1991). Besides modestly covering a woman’s body, the clothing must be loose
and shapeless, and opaque so as not to draw attention. To many women, hijab is the truest expression of being Muslim.

Many cultural groups practise hijab, although the form of hijab adopted varies considerably. Azerbaijani women wear a head scarf to cover their hair, while women of the Rashaayda Bedouin wear a married woman’s mask. The Indian sari, Sudanese tobah, Iraqi abayab, Turkish yashmak, North African djellabah and haik, and Egyptian milaya (Fernea & Fernea 2000; Hoodfar 2003) are also tangible expressions of cultural practices that hold deeply rooted meanings in each of these societies.

The practice of veiling is not unknown in Western society. A common example is the white veil covering a bride during a Christian wedding ceremony, symbolizing chastity and purity. Until the 1960s, women were required to cover their heads when in Catholic churches. Other cultural groups, including Hutterites, Amish, and Canadian Doukhobors, traditionally wore head scarves as a symbol of modesty and tradition. Catholic nuns also wear habits that exemplify a form of purdah and hijab.

So why do some Muslim women wear hijab? According to Hoodfar (1993:3), “veiling is a lived experience.” Wearing hijab, or even a simple head scarf, identifies a woman as a socially active Muslim, reflects her solidarity with other Muslims, and publicly proclaims her identity as a Muslim. Hijab expresses spirituality, personal dignity, and sexual integrity. Hijab has also become a symbol of Muslim women’s struggles for gender and ethnic justice when they publicly announce their Muslim identity in countries such as the United States. For some women, wearing hijab empowers them and enables them to challenge stereotypes about Muslims. According to Islamic scholar Wadid Ahmed, American Muslim women are able to integrate Islam with American social and political activism by wearing hijab (cited in Paulsell 2011).

Ensuring that females remain sexually pure until marriage and faithful to their husbands after marriage is the most common reason given for purdah (Khan 1999). Muslim clergy believe that Muslim women should wear hijab to protect their virtue and help men control their sexual appetites. In Egypt, women cover their bodies to ward off sexual harassment in the streets (Martin 2010). In Afghanistan, the chaadaree veil completely covers a woman’s head, thereby protecting men from distraction as they go about their religious and social duties (Hughes 2007). Furthermore, some Muslim women living in the West feel that wearing hijab isolates them from the Western tendency to objectify women. Observing purdah is also a symbol of the Muslim world’s rejection of Western morals and political ideology; therefore, wearing hijab has become politicized. Indeed, women in Egypt have worn hijab to express their Muslim identity, but also to reject former president Hosni Mubarak’s ties with the West, in particular the United States (Hughes 2007).

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2 In Cairo young women wear form-fitting tunics that are colour-coordinated with their hijab. They wear blue jeans beneath the tunics.
From a religious perspective, the Qur’an appears to sanction female seclusion: “And when you ask his wives for anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain (hejjab). That is purer for your hearts and their hearts.” According to the Qur’an, then, purdah is considered a code of behaviour that sustains a woman’s privacy, protects her reputation, and prevents sexual exploitation (Geissinger 2000). However, some Muslim women see the hijab as a submission to their God and faith, not to men (Bullock 2001). Fernea and Fernea (2000: 239) call the hijab “portable seclusion” that enables a woman to affect an aura of respectability and religious piety, thereby bringing honour to her family. Despite the religious link to hijab and purdah, however, the Qur’an does not specifically recommend veiling or seclusion (Mernissi 1991).

Purdah also serves to maintain control over wealth and property (de Souza 2004). Women are the mothers of sons who will inherit property and wealth from the patriarch; the paternity of these sons must therefore be ensured. Consequently, veiling has strong socio-economic implications, since “the more economic rights women have had, the more their sexuality has been subject to control through the development of complex social institutions” (Hoodfar 2003: 6). Thus, in some states, purdah is deemed more important for the wealthy upper classes who have property to protect than for the poorer lower classes. Purdah, then, becomes a symbol of status – only wealthy women can afford to practise purdah, while women who must work to help support their families find it difficult to practise.³

Although purdah requires women to wear concealing clothing when they leave the house, it also refers to female seclusion, or what Young (1996) calls segregation of the sexes.

³ In Egypt, women wear their hijab at work, or if they are domestics, they change into “working clothes” and remove their hijab once in their employer’s residence.
This segregation is practised among the Rashaayda Bedouin, who recognize private domestic spaces for women and open public spaces for men. In some cases, purdah has been used to keep women from participating in socio-economic and political life. Among the Yusufzai Pakhtun of the Swat Valley in northeast Pakistan, women remain secluded inside domestic compounds, leaving only to attend weddings, funerals, and circumcision rituals. If they do leave their homes, they must be accompanied by other women or a male family member (Lindholm & Lindholm 2000). This practice ensures that women spend most of their lives within the domestic sphere and are unable to obtain employment or an education, or to participate in other activities within their community.

THE HISTORY OF PURDAH AND HIJAB

The origin of purdah remains unclear, although it may have developed in ancient Persia. Regardless of its origin, purdah was practised long before the beginning of Islam (Nashat 1988). In fact, purdah did not spread to the Middle East until the Arab conquest of the region in the seventh century. Ancient Babylonian women were masked and chaperoned by a male relative when they left the house. They were also segregated in a separate part of the household. Similarly, respectable Assyrian women were hidden behind screens in their houses (Arnett 2001), while prostitutes were forbidden from veiling (Keddie & Baron 1991). Evidence of purdah and hijab has also been found in classical Greece, Byzantium, Persia, and India among the Rajput caste (Women in World History Curriculum 2011). In Assyrian, Greco-Roman, and Byzantine cultures and in the pre-Islamic empire in Persia, purdah was a mark of prestige and status, and in India, purdah was practised as early as 100 BCE to protect royal women from unwanted gazes (Khan 1999). Records suggest that the practice of hijab began in Islamic society after Mohammad’s wives were insulted (Fernea & Fernea 2000).

By the eighth century, female seclusion was well entrenched in Persia and the Eastern Mediterranean among the upper classes (Khan 1999), but not until the reign of the Safavids (1501–1722) did the veil emerge as a symbol of status among Muslim ruling classes and elite in Persia and the Ottoman Empire (1357–1924) (Hoodfar 2003). In India, purdah was followed even during colonial rule. Indeed, most of the negative perceptions that Westerners have regarding the veil originated during colonial periods when veiling was cited as an example of Muslim “backwardness” (Hoodfar 1993). This perceived subjugation of women in turn justified colonialism. However, colonialism did not better the position of Muslim women. In India, they lost their right to inherit property and wealth, and to maintain control over income they earned, bringing the economic rights of Muslim women more in line with Hindu and British women of the time. In essence, colonial rule destroyed the matrilineal societies of southern India (Khan 1999).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, liberals and intellectuals pushed for an end to hijab and purdah. Following the 1923 international feminist meeting in Rome, Islamic feminists in Egypt publicly de-veiled (Hoodfar 1993). Despite Islamic feminism labelling the veil a symbol of oppression in the early twentieth century, especially in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, by the latter half of the century this ideology was revisited. As the twentieth century progressed, hijab enjoyed a revival, especially in areas where people felt that Islam was being...
threatened by Western influence. *Hijab* became a symbol of religious piety, cultural identity, and feminine virtue.

Today, *hijab* is compulsory in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and expected in countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Kuwait, and Palestine. In other Muslim countries, conditions remain volatile, with some segments advocating *hijab*, while others have rejected the custom. Women find themselves at the centre of this debate, often enduring harassment and discrimination whether they wear *hijab* or not, depending on the current political and ideological atmosphere. Thus, *purdah* and *hijab* are dynamic practices. Indeed, Hoodfar (1993: 5) argues that “in Muslim cultures the veil’s functions and social significance have varied tremendously, particularly during times of a rapid social change.”

**PURDAH AND HIJAB AS OPPRESSION**

Those outside the Muslim world often think that Muslim women occupy a subordinate position in Middle Eastern countries (Cohen & Peery 2006) and that *hijab* is a symbol of this supposed oppression. However, we should question whether oppression and subjugation are a reality for Muslim women. Indeed, a recent resurgence of the *hijab* has been noted among educated Muslim women who wish to announce their faith and traditions: “Young Muslim women are reclaiming the *hijab*, reinterpreting it in light of its original purpose – to give back to women ultimate control of their own bodies” (Mustafa n.d.: 1).

To understand how Muslim women outside the confines of a Muslim country view the veil, Read and Bartkowski (2000) conducted a study of two dozen Muslim women living in Austin, Texas. Half of these women wore the veil and the other half were unveiled. They found that the unveiled women viewed *hijab* as a mechanism for the patriarchal domination of women: “The veil is used to control women” (408). Both groups felt that *hijab* was directly related to men’s sexuality and lack of control: “Men can’t control themselves, so they make women veil” (408).

Many of the unveiled respondents sought to weaken the link between *hijab* and religion: “Women are made to believe that the veil is religious. In reality, it’s all political” (408). However, some narratives from veiled women indicate that they do wear *hijab* for religious reasons: “I wear the *hijab* because the Qur’an says it’s better” (403). Another woman believed that “the veil represents submission to God” (403). *Hijab* can also be a cultural marker – a statement of a Muslim’s ethnic and cultural distinctiveness: “The veil differentiates Muslim women from other women. When you see a woman in hijab, you know she’s Muslim” (404). Even the unveiled women considered *hijab* an important cultural marker: “Some Muslim women need the veil to identify them with the Muslim culture” (409).

Although veiled women in this study did not explicitly discuss the idea that men’s sexual activities must be controlled, they did allude to the problem: “If the veil did not exist, many evil things would happen. Boys would mix with girls, which will result in evil things” (404). The sense of female distinctiveness was articulated by one woman: “Women are like diamonds; they are so precious. They should not be revealed to everyone – just to their husbands and close kin” (404). Contrary to the Western perspective that *hijab* restricts women, the veiled women in Read and Bartkowski’s (2000) study felt that the veil liberated them. To these women, then, *hijab* has overlapping religious, gendered, and ethnic significance.

“Women who wear the hijab are not excluded from society. They are freer to move around in society because of it.” A North American Muslim woman, quoted in Read & Bartkowski (2000: 405).
Opponents view *purdah* as oppressive, depriving women of human rights such as education, economic independence, and participation in community life. They see *purdah* as a way to marginalize and subjugate women. Interestingly, some feminist writers on *hijab* suggest that women are veiled to mute their sexual desires and their potential danger to men (Bonvillain 1998), while women who wear *hijab* believe it is men’s sexual desires that are controlled. Opponents also point out that *hijab* originated before Islam and outside the Middle East, that using religious scripture to support wearing *hijab* is false reasoning, and that interpretations of the scriptures and *hadiths* are highly questionable.

A common rationale for *hijab* is the sense of anonymity. “Wearing the *hijab* has given me freedom from constant attention to my physical self,” says Canadian-born Muslim Naheed Mustafa (n.d.: n.p.) who began wearing a head scarf at the age of 21. While others tend to see her as a terrorist or an oppressed woman, she feels liberated – free from unwanted sexual advances and the body politics of Western “gender games.” Empirical evidence suggests that men interact differently with women wearing *hijab*. Supporters of *purdah* also suggest that seclusion can offer women protection and safe haven, a place where they can relax and enjoy their favourite activities.

Although the discussion thus far has taken a positive perspective toward *purdah* and *hijab*, in the following cultural examples you will see that they can also be used as a vehicle of control over women and children, as well as to fulfill political and religious agendas.

**PALESTINE**

During the *intifada* of the 1980s in Gaza, Hamas extremists attempted to impose *hijab* on Palestinian women (Hammami 1990). These women, who had enjoyed relative freedom to choose whether to wear *hijab*, now found their dress code under increasing scrutiny and pressure to conform to the Hamas interpretation of *hijab*. Although *hijab* was common among older Palestinian peasant women, many educated urban women had given up wearing any form of *hijab* by the 1950s (Hammami 1990). Even those wearing *hijab* considered it a symbol of group identity, not a genderized restriction. For some, *hijab* was a symbol of resistance to Israeli occupation in Gaza. Regardless of how the *hijab* was viewed, most Palestinian women were against forced imposition of *hijab*.

The Hamas, however, sought to restore *hijab* as part of a movement to return to a moral and social order closer to their interpretations of Islam. Hamas considered *hijab* a reflection of traditional Islamic piety and political affiliation. Women who refused became targets for attacks by youths who threw stones at them and shouted verbal abuse. The original religious and modesty aspects of *hijab* seemed lost, and *hijab* became a sign of a woman’s political commitment to the *intifada*. As one woman said, “It [the *hijab*] is not an issue for me. ... In my community [Abassan] it’s natural to wear it. The problem is when little boys, including my son, feel they have the right to tell me to wear it” (Hammami 1990: 26).

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4 Sayings or anecdotes about Muhammad.
5 Intifada symbolizes the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.
In May 1988, hooligans, acting under the auspice of Hamas, broke into a school and demanded that the girls wear the hijab, and in September of that year a group of males attacked girls at the Ahmad Shawqi school in Gaza City for not covering their heads (Hammami 1990). When the attacks on women spread to Jerusalem, the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) political leaders in Gaza came to the aid of Palestinian women. After a particularly ugly incident in which two women were harassed and accused of being collaborators, the UNLU condemned the attacks in a statement, and the attacks stopped for a time (Hammami 1990). Unfortunately, in 1990 Hamas resumed the hijab campaign with a vengeance, but now they were advocating full body coverage. Hamas also issued orders that women were to have a male relative with them when leaving the house. Hamas has even advocated for the imposition of Sharia law, with particular attention to Islamic dress code, and in February 2011, women's hairstyling by men was banned in Gaza (Cunningham 2010). Obviously in Palestine, hijab is being used as an instrument of oppression, “a direct disciplining of women’s bodies for political ends” (Hammami 1990: 25).

Palestinian women resisting the pressure to wear hijab are not necessarily against the practice, but they want the right to choose. They also resist the patriarchal control that Hamas has been trying to wield, and fear that hijab is only a first step in an offensive against Palestinian women’s rights. In 2013, the majority of Palestinian women wear hijab, but those who do not experience social pressure to conform, and some women have even been arrested. As an example of how extreme this pressure can become, female students at Al-Azhar University, although a far less conservative institution than some of the universities in Gaza, must wear the hijab in order to receive their graduation certificate (Saldanha 2010).

IRAN

The story of women and hijab in Iran has taken a convoluted path that differs dramatically depending on socio-economic class. The veil was banned by Reza Shah Pahlevi in 1936 (Talvi 2002) as part of the Women’s Awakening and the Shah’s plan to modernize Iran. For modern urban Iranian women, this project opened up educational and employment opportunities – if they gave up their veils (Amin 2002). Following the project’s failure, urban women experienced a backlash from men; some unveiled women were even attacked by religious extremists.

For lower- and middle-class Iranian women, banning the veil created scandal and great inconvenience. These women were socialized from birth to see the veil as the only respectable way to dress, and they did not want to appear in the streets “naked” (Hoodfar 1993: 10). Where they had previously shopped and built social support networks in the neighbourhood, they now stayed at home – too embarrassed to appear in public without their hijab. Since many of their husbands were away working, they were reduced to begging male relatives and neighbours to perform public tasks for them.

There were also economic implications. Moderate families no longer allowed their daughters to attend school if they could not wear hijab. Young women who used to attend carpet-making workshops to earn some independent income now stayed at home. Some resorted to making carpets at home, but their male relatives had to sell them, thereby gaining control over the women’s productive strategies and income. The women also lost their only avenue for socializing with neighbours. Thus, this new law created a culture of dependency among middle- and lower-class conservative women and led to further seclusion and isolation of women in Iranian society.
By the 1960s and 1970s, Iranian women under the rule of the Shah enjoyed a degree of independence. They received educations and worked in traditionally male professions. However, this does not mean that Iranian women were free from oppression. Those who veiled were arrested and their veils forcibly removed, at least until dress codes became more open and women were allowed to wear the veil if they so chose. In the 1970s, the political atmosphere changed and Iranian women began wearing the chador (black, loose-fitting robes). When the Shah was deposed in 1979 and the Islamic Revolution swept the country, the chador became compulsory, and women were once again punished – this time for not wearing hijab (Talvi 2002). Under the Ayatollah Khomeini, religious and cultural fundamentalism forced women to veil and take on more traditional gender roles. Women were seen as pivotal to changing Iran’s moral code, and those who resisted were mocked and called “unchaste painted dolls” (Women in World History Curriculum 2011). Witnesses recounted the terror of executions by public stoning of women who broke the strict laws of Islamic appearance and conduct (Talvi 2002).

When Middle Eastern studies professor Faegheh Shirazi visited her home country of Iran in 1997, graffiti slogans such as “Death to the improperly veiled woman” covered the walls of buildings, reminding her that hijab was not only a cultural and religious custom to Iranians, but an ideology that permeated every aspect of their lives. Propaganda on the virtues of the veil was everywhere: television programs, newspaper and magazine articles and advertisements, and even stamps had the word hijab inscribed on the lower left corner (Shirazi 2001).

Although wearing the hijab has been the custom in several periods of Iranian history, in modern Iran choice is no longer an issue. This suggests that currently hijab is an instrument of gender oppression in Iran, and a symbol of the degradation of women’s rights. However, we should not construe from the above that Iranian women are passive, powerless pawns in the regime. Women have ways of exerting power; for example, if a man outside the family argues with a woman, she may insult him by dropping her veil, indicating that she does not consider him a real man (Hoodfar 1991). Resistance against the veil is also common through small gestures, such as leaving strands of hair free. These acts of defiance “develop [women’s] identities specifically for the reason that they are forbidden; and enables them to construct their identities against the torturous rituals governing what they are forced to wear, how they are expected to act, the gestures they have to control, the daily struggle against arbitrary rules and restrictions” (Shilandari 2010: n.p.).

AFGHANISTAN

The image of an Afghan woman scurrying through the streets, completely concealed beneath a blue burqa, is difficult for Westerners to reconcile with their sense of personal freedom and human rights. When they were in public spaces, Afghan women under the control of the Taliban had to be concealed beneath a form of burqa known as a chadri. Only close family members – husbands, children, fathers, and siblings – and other women were allowed to see a woman without her chadri. Afghan women were also forbidden to work outside the home or to pursue an education. Feminists liken the lives of Afghan women under the rule of the Taliban to “gender apartheid” (Geissinger 2000).

“Some Western feminists have such strong opinions about the veil that they are totally incapable of seeing the women who wear them, much less their reasons for doing so.”

(Hoodfar 1993: 14)
Resurgence of the *hijab* began in the 1970s; the Taliban simply made the custom a law. Since the overthrow of the Taliban, women have returned to school and university and have assumed professional positions. Yet their lives are far from peaceful or safe; warlords who have traditionally practised ethnically motivated rape are now in positions of power sanctioned by the United States. Thus, many Afghan women continue to wear the *chadri*, partly for safety, and partly because of the historical and cultural significance of *purdah*. To the men, women are socially immature and likely to behave irresponsibly, so to protect the family honour, strict regulation of *purdah* is necessary. Thus, social and familial pressures continue to perpetuate the practice of *purdah* among Afghani women.

The purpose of the *burqa* is ostensibly to silence or make women invisible. It has served to do both in Afghanistan; however, international development consultant Michelle Risinger (2012) sees a transformation of the *chadri* taking place, from a symbol of oppression to a means of resistance and empowerment. Afghani women, in their resistance to Taliban culture and its proponents, have learned to use the *chadri* for concealment and protection (Boone 2010). Women’s resistance movements, including the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, run orphanages and women’s literacy classes, and raise awareness of women’s rights among Afghani women. They are also suspected of organizing public demonstrations against a law that gave Shia males “the right to demand sex from their wives while denying them basic rights” (Boone 2010: n.p.). Thus, although self-determination for Afghani women is a distant dream, there are women within the country who are working toward that goal.

**WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF *PURDAH* AND MUSLIM WOMEN**

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims in North America have found themselves under a new and intense scrutiny – what Alan Lebleigez, a European Union parliament member, has called Islamaphobia (Bishr n.d.). *Discrimination* against, and harassment of, women dressed in *hijab* in countries such as Canada has shocked the Muslim community and reiterated their status as that of the “Other.” *Purdah* has become symbolic of this otherness.

In response to what is a form of *cultural imperialism*, Muslims are re-asserting their identity, including wearing *hijab*. However, *hijab* makes Westerners feel uncomfortable because, with it, women seem to become invisible, and a negative image of *purdah* and *hijab* is still very evident in the West (Bullock 2001). Canada has also banned face veils at citizenship oath ceremonies and is considering banning them in schools, hospitals, and government buildings (BBC News 2011). Muslim women have been accosted by other Canadians and accused of bringing “backwardness” to Canada. Even some Muslim women have decried the *hijab*, wanting Muslims to modernize. However, forcing a woman to conform to Canadian ideals of dress and give up a symbol of her Muslim identity is a form of discrimination and is as oppressive as forcing a woman to wear *hijab*.

Readers might ask how something like this could happen in a multicultural country like Canada. The answer lies in the uneasy truce between religion and the secularization of Canadian institutions. Culturally, Westerners have not moved beyond the image of *hijab* as oppressive. They continue to express concern that women who wear *hijab* must have been...

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6 Although United States troops drove the Taliban out of Kabul, the cultural environment the Taliban created still exists.
pressured or coerced into doing so by male relatives or religious leaders. Despite Canada’s official multiculturalism policy, when it comes to hijab, there is a sense that Muslims should comply with Western behaviour.

In March 2004, France banned conspicuous religious symbols and attire in schools – children were no longer allowed to wear Islamic head scarves, Christian crosses, Jewish skull caps, or Sikh turbans (IRNA 2005). Yet the real target was Muslim veiling. According to the Stasis Commission, created by former French president Jacques Chirac to examine the principle of secularity, the veil is a rejection of mixité – coeducation and the mixing of the sexes (Debré 2003). Banning the veil in France meant that Muslim girls could no longer attend coeducational schools. Full face veils were also banned in Belgium in 2010, setting off a firestorm of debate, especially since so few women actually wear them. Amnesty International has condemned the Belgian law, calling it “an attack on religious freedom” (Hasan 2010: 22). Some states in Germany have passed similar legislation. Muslim women and supporters protested this move, demanding their religious freedom. In fact, human-rights activists and some European Union parliament members are demanding that EU countries respect the freedom of faith and dress (Islamonline.net).

In Turkey, where veiling is not encouraged, educated urban women are returning to hijab, reflecting a renewed interest in their religion and culture, and a desire to publicly affirm their Muslim identity and physically announce resistance to Western domination. This return to traditional Islamic dress has been met with opposition. In Turkey, head scarves have been banned from educational institutions and state offices, and young women have been arrested for wearing head scarves to class (Geissinger 2000). Women have also been expelled from government positions. In Uzbekistan, men with beards and women with scarves have been harassed and arrested. In Cameroon, veils are banned in state-subsidized schools; this ban has been blamed for the establishment of private Islamic schools (van Santen 2010). These acts of discrimination have been justified as a way to stamp out fundamentalism and terrorism.

Debate among Islamic groups continues to rage today. Some groups, such as the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) in Pakistan, actively reject attempts to impose hijab on women, while the women’s mosque movement in Egypt aims to return the veil to a symbol of religious piety rather than religico-cultural identity (Mahmood 2003). According to Hajja Nur, a mosque teacher, Egyptian women “understand forms of bodily practice (such as veiling) to not simply express the self but also shape the self that they are supposed to signify” (Mahmood 2003: 843). European activists have demonstrated at state buildings to demand religious freedom of expression. At a Wayne State University protest in the United States, scarves became a weapon against ignorance and a symbol of solidarity (Capeloto 2004). Non-Muslim women

“If I don’t stand up for Muslim women’s right to wear hijab when they want to, who’s going to stand up for me when I’m attacked?” A non-Muslim supporter, quoted in Capeloto (2004: 1).

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7 Full face veils are worn only by the most conservative of Muslim sects.
donned the scarves alongside Muslim women in defence of a growing worldwide campaign to show support for the right to wear hijab.

CONCLUSION

The practice of purdah is a complicated issue. Hijab represents three major tenets in a Muslim woman’s life: religious faith and adherence to religious commandments; cultural and personal identity representing status, class, kinship, and culture membership; and political consciousness and activism. Although the custom is often symptomatic of a patriarchal society, it is also a way for women to affirm their religious beliefs and their respectability. In many ways, wearing hijab is a liberating practice – de-emphasizing the beauty and sexuality of a woman, and drawing attention to her self-worth.

Veiling is certainly a dynamic cultural practice with myriad meanings. Unfortunately, much of the literature takes a negative and rather limited stance on purdah, whether the history of the custom is being examined or contemporary practices discussed. It is only when we ask the women themselves what purdah means to them and why they choose to continue wearing hijab that we learn there are many facets to the issue. The changing meanings of hijab and purdah are above all symbolic of the way in which beliefs can transform through time and region.

Fernandez (2009) suggests that Western concern for Muslim women is merely a shield for anti-Muslim sentiment. She also warns that focusing on gender equality issues such as veiling is facilitating the institutionalization of Islamaphobia. Within the broader scope of geopolitics, the controversy surrounding Muslim women and the veil coincides with Europe’s retreat from multiculturalism as concepts such as civil integration of immigrant communities are gaining ground (Mullally 2011).

There is an enormous difference between voluntarily adopting hijab and being forced to wear it. Although shrouded in religious dogma, purdah and hijab are far more a political issue. The three cultural examples in this chapter exemplify this point: in Palestine, Iran, and Afghanistan, the political agendas of Hamas, the Iranian regime, and the Taliban exploit purdah as one of many forms of control. The hijab is just one symptom of a repressive society. The key here seems to be that of choice: if a woman chooses to wear hijab, then that is her will. However, if the practice is forced on her, whether it be through insidious social pressure, familial demands, or overt threats of punishment, then it is oppressive, no matter the country. With regards to female seclusion, the issues are more clouded. It appears that women obey seclusionary rules to keep peace with parents, husbands, and religious leaders. Choice does not appear to play a significant role in the equation. Does this mean that secluded women are oppressed – victims of gender exclusion and inequality? Only these women can answer that, and they have not yet spoken.

The issue should not be whether women are wearing hijab, nor should they be stigmatized for doing so. Rather, the issue should be whether they have access to the same resources and opportunities as men. Obviously, many women choose to wear the hijab. The reasons for this choice are numerous, and to a certain extent they may be connected to oppression, but not the oppression of the veil – rather the oppression of societies that fail to offer women equal status and treatment. A woman who feels safer covered in folds of cloth so that men will not leer at her or make unwanted advances is being oppressed by men, not the veil. A woman who feels she will be taken seriously as a human being with something
to offer the community only if she is anonymously hidden behind concealing clothing is being oppressed by societal views, not the veil. A woman who must hide under a burqa to attend school or a women’s rights rally is being oppressed by political factions, not the veil. This type of oppression is worldwide, and is as serious an issue in the West as anywhere else in the world.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. As a global citizen, where do you stand on the issue of purdah and hijab? Do you consider it oppressive to force young Muslim women to remove their head scarves or other religious symbols? Why or why not? Are students free to wear religious symbols at your institution? Would you stand up for their right to do so?
2. Research the meaning of purdah to Muslims, and then compare it to the meaning held by most Westerners. How are these views influenced by cultural environments, media, and body politics?
3. Choose two or three countries and investigate whether and why wearing hijab has increased or decreased.
4. Ultimately, this chapter was about gender stratification, although readers should recognize that this oppression does not come from purdah, but rather that purdah is a symptom of global female oppression. Examine your own society. How are women limited in their economic, social, and political opportunities, or restricted by the attitudes of society?
5. Although this chapter focused on female purdah, in some cultures there are male purdah rules as well. Identify purdah requirements for men in Egypt, Pakistan, and Sudan.
6. Debate question: Is purdah oppressive? Choose a country and argue your side based on the reality of that country.

SUGGESTED READINGS


A collection of 21 essays that provide valuable discourse on the multiple meanings of veiling, through the voices of women. These essays cross time, space, and culture. A must-read book for anyone interested in current women’s and human issues.


This book is an engrossing, non-academic treatment of purdah and the hijab that actually examines hijab as part of everyday or popular culture. Shirazi attempts to dispel some stereotypes about Muslim women without resorting to theoretical perspectives, which makes this book a refreshing read for everyone.