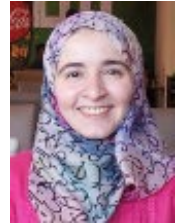


International Women's Day: protecting the rights of Muslim women must not be used as a basis for denying their agency

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/03/08/international-womens-day-protecting-the-rights-of-muslim-women-must-not-be-used-as-a-b

08/03/2015

International Women's Day, which is held on 8 March every year, aims to celebrate the achievements of women while calling for greater gender equality across the world. To mark the event, [Nourhan Elsayed](#) writes on debates over the rights of Muslim women. She argues that campaigners in the West should seek to develop a more accommodative approach, where their non-Western counterparts are understood on their own terms as equal partners, rather than simply helpless victims.



When Barack Obama flew with his wife to Saudi Arabia earlier this year to offer his condolences for the death of King Abdullah, and boost a long-standing relationship with the Saudi monarchy, discussions on social media focused less on the purpose of the visit, and the implications of the enthronement of a new king in Saudi Arabia. Instead, a great many social media users appeared more interested in the attire of the first lady.

With the Charlie Hebdo attacks fresh in their minds, along with the anti-Islamic sentiments they provoked, many observers took Michelle Obama's unveiled hair as a symbol of a revolution against the allegedly oppressive, patriarchal code of dress that Islam and Muslim men enforce on (Muslim) women. A day later, a number of journalists, who were better informed about the Saudi diplomatic protocol, remarked that it was a mistake to think the first lady was willfully staging a revolutionary act, pointing out that first ladies and senior officials from the US and other countries had always visited Saudi royals without a headscarf, and that forced veiling is simply [not part of the protocol](#).

Thanks to the media, Islam, especially after the September 11th attacks of the World Trade Center in New York and the subsequent American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, has been presented to the Western TV viewer and newspaper reader as a violent, intolerant religion. More particularly, Islam has been portrayed as having a systematically oppressive stance towards women.

Indeed, one of the publicly announced justifications for the American intervention in Afghanistan was to defend the rights of Muslim women, who were supposedly oppressed by the Islamic faith. This "crusade" to "save" Muslim women also manifests itself in more subtle, less militaristic ways, ranging from Michelle Obama's misinterpreted outfit to the "struggle" of many French feminists in 2010 to save Muslim women by campaigning for the banning of the *hijab* (headscarf) in public spaces, in what became known as the *hijab* controversy.

In most – if not all – the mainstream feminist debates on Muslim women, the *hijab* serves as a symbol around which to mobilise efforts to emancipate these women. In Sirma Blige's [words](#), it became an over-determined cultural signifier that mainstream feminists in the West associate with, among other things, the subordination of women to Islamic patriarchy and their developing of a false consciousness. The "subordination" argument rests on an assumption that women who wear the *hijab* were forced by men to wear it.

As for women who contend that wearing the *hijab* was their own choice, they are described as having developed a "false consciousness". Yet what both of these interpretations have in common is that they dehumanise Muslim women by denying them their agency. This implies that the veiled woman "does not know what is good for her" and that women in the West, by contrast, can teach her how to understand lofty concepts like agency and freedom.

Corollary to this form of Orientalist feminism is that Muslim women's voices are silenced, and their opinions on what the *hijab* actually means to them go unheard. What most veiled women have to say about the *hijab* is actually

substantially different from the feminist critique. As anthropologists Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod [point out](#), the justifications most often given by Muslim women for taking up the *hijab* relate to modesty, piety and morality.

A person with the most basic knowledge of Islamic thought would not find these claims far-fetched. There is an agreement in the Islamic legal literature on the importance of dressing modestly, and there are rules on how to achieve that for both men and women. Hence, if feminists are to fully comprehend Muslim women's motivations for wearing the *hijab*, religion must be incorporated into the discussion. Whether these motivations stem from "true agency" or qualify as "free choices" are entirely subjective matters. For the headscarf is a neutral object; it only gains meaning through the symbolism that its wearer attaches to it.

So how can feminists in the West (or anyone interested in the issue) understand Muslim women and the hardships they face? The first step, paradoxically, is to stop using the label "Muslim women" in discussions. The label is generic and broad to such an extent that it ceases to be useful or meaningful in any serious, nuanced exploration of the plight of the women it is concerned about.

As Lila Abu-Lughod [argues](#), this term lumps together women from a most diverse set of cultural, social, political and economic backgrounds, effacing the (often radical) differences between them, and assembling them together under one fictitious distant geography. By doing so, the usage of the term leads one to neglect the unique challenges that 'Muslim women' living in different conditions experience and may lead to inadequate solutions for problems that do not exist.

The second step in understanding the plight of Muslim women – or more accurately, the plight of any group of women – is to adopt what feminist academics call an intersectional approach. Intersectionality involves understanding that women around the world experience different kinds of oppression, and that their experiences are qualitatively different. To gain insight into their experience, one has to understand how different systems of oppression (such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, political conditions, nationality, disability, etc.) intersect to produce a specific experience of oppression that is unique to certain women.

For example, to understand the experience of Muslim women in the UK, one would have to study the life experiences of groups as diverse as white middle-class British female converts, second-generation working-class Somali women, and first-generation middle-class Pakistani women, to name just a few. The necessity for a multi-layered, intersectional approach arises from the fact that aspects of identity, such as gender and race, do not always act independently, but often overlap and play a role in producing systems of oppression.

Simply put, the alternative approach that is needed is the development of a more accommodative form of mainstream feminism, one in which women in the West understand their non-Western counterparts in the latter's own terms, and treat them as equal partners, not helpless minors.



This article was originally published
in Spanish by Agenda Pública

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