

Head scarf is far more than a symbol for Muslim women

By Asma Mobin-Uddin

Published by the Columbus Dispatch (Forum page), February 25, 2004

Distributed by the Religion News Service, April 2, 2004

The French National Assembly voted recently to ban Islamic head scarves (hijab) from public schools. The French Senate will vote on the issue in March, and it is expected to pass. The French state feels it has the right to mandate what parts of women's bodies must be shown in public. French feminists support the ban, citing concerns about oppression of women.

Muslim women in France and all over the world have demonstrated against the ban, rejecting the stereotype that hijab implies oppression and protesting the infringement on their religious freedom. Clearly there is confusion as to what constitutes oppression of women.

The oppression of women can take many forms. Obvious examples include when women are denied access to education, subjected to violence or refused a political voice. Less obvious forms of oppression can be just as damaging to women's freedom and potential for development. The objectification and commercialization of women in Western societies are forms of such oppression. Popular culture stresses that, whatever else she achieves, a woman should look young, supple and sensual. In this environment, a woman's primary value becomes based not on her character, intelligence or abilities, but rather on her physical attributes.

Self-esteem can become inseparable from a woman's perception of her physical attractiveness. Many women spend time, energy and money obsessively trying to create an outward appearance that will satisfy their inner need for self-acceptance.

Not limiting themselves to changes in clothing, cosmetics or hairstyles, more and more women are permanently deforming their bodies in order to be considered attractive by men. In 2002 alone, more than 5.6 million American women underwent invasive cosmetic procedures. Of the cosmetic plastic surgical procedures performed in the United States, 85 percent are done on women. The most common of these is breast augmentation surgery. Of the breast augmentation surgeries done in the United States in 2002, more than 3,000 were performed on people age 18 or under. The Los Angeles Times has even reported on the growing trend of these surgeries being given to girls as gifts for 16th birthdays or graduations.

Our society's preoccupation with physical beauty and sexuality has also resulted in the rampant exploitation of women in the marketplace. The commercial use of women's bodies in advertising has become so common that we readily accept it.

The Islamic tradition refuses to allow sexuality and visual display to be the basis of male-female relations. Such displays are considered degrading and beneath the dignity of both men and women.

Islamic teachings define parameters for interactions between men and women who are not married to each other or closely related. These teachings seek to remove distraction due to sexuality so men and women can interact with each other based on dignity and mutual respect. The Quran is clear that the responsibility for maintaining appropriate behavior in society begins with each individual, male and female. Modesty in attitude, behavior and dress is stressed for both sexes. Men are addressed first in the Quranic verses that command men and women to use their eyes with restraint and propriety and to behave decently. Women are then called upon to

conceal their beauty and cover themselves when around men outside of their family. The added injunctions for women are understandable when we consider which sex is more often exploited for physical characteristics. Far from being oppressive or degrading, these injunctions empower women to take control of their bodies by covering themselves.

Muslim women who choose to wear the Islamic head scarf in conjunction with modest dress do so as an act of obedience to God. Wearing the hijab does not prevent us from becoming educated, pursuing a career or being politically active. It allows us to move confidently in the world, knowing others will have to deal with us based on our character, skills and abilities, not on our physical characteristics. Our form of dress sends a clear message that we refuse to participate in the cultural practices that exploit women and that encourage the use of physical beauty or sexuality as a means of advancement. Those of us who choose the hijab find dignity and liberation in the folds of cloth that shield and protect us.

A state that compels its women to cover themselves is unjust. Equally unjust is the state that prevents women from covering if they choose to do so. Women must have the right to define their own limits for modesty.

It is unconscionable, as we struggle in the West with the ever increasing objectification and commercialization of women, that a society that says it is for “liberty, equality and fraternity” and claims to protect women’s rights refuses to grant Muslim women the right to cover their bodies as they choose.

Dr. Asma Mobin-Uddin is a pediatrician from Columbus, Ohio who grew up in the United States and has worn hijab for the past 15 years. She is vice president of the Council on American-Islamic Relations’ Ohio Chapter.