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Some Muslim women in Australia have a real hard time. They feel persecuted and judged by society because they represent a culture that is deemed backward, inferior and misogynous. Those Muslim women who wear the hijab to cover their hair are at the forefront of a culture war. The hijab has come to represent everything that is unacceptable about Islam. It may be amusing to note that not all Muslim women wear the hijab. In fact the proportion of those who do is much smaller than those who do not. Despite this anomaly, hijabi women bear the brunt of the backlash and as a result carry a disproportionate responsibility to represent Muslims in Australia.

As visible representatives of Islam in Australian society, hijabi women have to contend with discrimination (both overt and subtle) and at times assault and violence. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent international effort to push Iraq out provided the backdrop to a surge of anti-Muslim assaults in Australia. Reports of discrimination and abuse rose again in the wake of the September 11 attacks as many commentators implied a seamless link between Islam and terrorism. Incidents of violence and abuse against Muslims have generally spiked following terrorist attacks, suggesting that many Australians hold all Muslims responsible for terrorism.
Accordingly, they do not see Muslims as a welcome part of Australian society, but as representing a foreign and irreconcilable culture. The misguided debate about 'Australian values' and 'Islamic values', fanned by the government of John Howard for electoral gains, reinforced the idea that the two entities are diametrically opposed and incompatible.

This is not a uniquely Australian problem. Similar experiences have been reported in Britain and France, two countries with significant Muslim minorities, as they tackle the vexed issues of personal freedom and the state's scope of responsibility in protecting social values. But in what circumstances and to what extent does a secular state have a mandate to regulate religious practice? This question came to the fore in France with the adoption of the Religious Symbols Law in 2004. It prohibits the wearing of conspicuously religious symbols in public schools. The law was adopted in the name of laïcité to keep the public domain free of religious proselytising. But it impacts on Muslims significantly more than other religious communities. The Star of David and crosses on necklaces can be worn under school uniforms and remain inconspicuous, but not the hijab. In fact, the debate over public displays of religious symbols started in 1989 because of the barring of a veiled student from a school by its headmaster, and culminated in the 2004 law. It was not surprising that the law, once adopted, first and foremost affected Muslim girls in hijab.

Debate and tension over the issue is unlikely to go away anytime soon as Muslim women in hijab continue to assert their rights as citizens. As far as they are concerned, participating in public activities is a basic right. That is how Carole, a mother of two living in Paris, saw it when she visited the local pool with her children in her Burqini, full-length swimwear created by a Sydney designer and used by Muslim women lifesavers on Sydney beaches. The decision of the Parisian swimming pool management to bar Carole from the pool was presented in terms of hygiene. This controversy came on the heels of a controversial speech by French President Nicolas Sarkozy where he rejected 'head-to-toe' cover as unacceptable in France. Given the uncompromising commitment of the French authorities to the proclaimed mantle of laïcité and the resolve of hijabi women to preserve their Islamic identity while remaining active in social life, the controversy is set to continue.
Hijab and Oppression

The anti-hijab argument often has a feminist slant and is based on the flawed assumption that the veil is a symbol of oppression and the exclusion of Muslim women from social life. According to this view, the veil prevents women from taking part in society and acting as free and full citizens. Ann Aly and David Walker, commenting on the Western view of the hijab, argue that the 'veil stands as the single, most powerful symbol of the gender based oppression'. This is not a new interpretation. Travelogues and books on Muslim women published at the turn of the twentieth century by Western travellers contained disdain for the condition of women and shock at how ignorant these women were of their own plight. Gender oppression in the Muslim world only confirmed the superiority of the Western way for these commentators and validated their belief in their role as agents of civilisation. As a result, it was seen as incumbent upon the civilised men and women of the West to rescue the powerless Muslim women from the yoke of gender oppression.

The current debate about the place of the hijab in Western civilisation is not far removed from that colonial mindset. President Sarkozy gave voice to this perspective when he told the French Parliament that 'we cannot accept in our country women imprisoned behind netting; cut off from any social life, deprived of any identity. This is not the idea the French republic has of a woman's dignity'. What follows from this assumption is an interventionist top-down move to liberate the 'imprisoned' Muslim women. In the case of France, the state takes it upon itself to pressure, censure and ultimately reform the behaviour of citizens who do not comply with the mainstream model of morality. It is ironic that a state in the bastion of liberty is acting as an instrument of conformity.

Irony aside, the argument against veiling misses the point by ignoring the very different reasons some Muslim women wear it. There is no direct correlation between the hijab and exclusion from the social life of the community. Wearing some sort of veil is usual practice in most rural communities in the Muslim world. This is often in the form of a colourful, loosely held headscarf (except in Iran where wearing the hijab is mandatory). The urban form of the hijab among the educated classes, however, tends to be less relaxed. Headscarves tend to be unicolour and more carefully controlled to

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conceal hair in Muslim cities. Another form of hijab, the most controversial, is the full-length burqa that is common in parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Arabian Peninsula. The distinction between rural and urban forms of the hijab is noteworthy as they reflect the very different ways the two communities relate to religion. For rural women, religion is very much part of their heritage and local traditions. Islam is practised by default as part and parcel of social and personal life with very little active involvement to understand and interpret it. Wearing the hijab is simply the way women have behaved in rural sectors; group dynamics and peer pressure ensure continuity and the regeneration of local traditions.

The urban form of hijab suggests a more active involvement with religion and what it means for the educated professional Muslim women. This is in line with the more general pattern observed by Ernest Gellner, whereby the educated urbanite invests intellectually in Islam, its traditions and, most importantly of all, its holy book. This active commitment to Islam tends to focus more on the sacred word than traditional rituals, leading to a text-based faith. Uniformity of understanding and practices is a by-product of this textual urban approach, made possible by the modern forms of communication and social organisation. If true Islam is based on a sacred, timeless, holy book, and not traditional practices passed from one generation to the next, then its message is immutable, its meaning singular. The textual approach to Islam strives for that uniform singularity of meaning and practice. The unicolour headscarf worn by university students and professionals is an example of this active engagement with Islam and the prevalence of the textual approach.

This textual approach to Islam, rather than the habitual regeneration of community practices, and the emphasis on the hijab take on additional significance in an environment where wearing the hijab is explicitly or implicitly discouraged by the state. This was the case in Turkey before the ascendance of the Refah Party to power in 1996, in Iran before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and in most present-day Western societies (especially France, the United Kingdom and Australia). In this context the hijab symbolises dissent and rebellion against the dominant value system, challenging the acceptable mode of clothing. For many Muslim women, donning the hijab in this environment is a public statement that challenges the role of sexuality in public and purports to present an alternative image. The alternative
Muslim female persona is a social actor who is not allowing herself to be judged by the dominant, materialistic criteria of fashion and beauty. This is an act of defiance and aims to generate an alternative reality where hijabi women continue to operate and be visible in public. As a result, many see the hijab as empowering. Far from the conventional criticism of the hijab as a symbol of social exclusion, it is seen as a liberating tool that allows Muslim women to remain present in the public domain without the fear of being seen as sexual objects.

**Sexuality**

This perspective rests on certain assumptions about modesty, sexuality and relations between men and women. Ironically, these underlying concerns are shared between enlightened hijabi women and conservative Muslim men. They relate to the significance placed on the female figure and its potential to distract and corrupt men. Sexual imagery in advertising has only confirmed the underlying assumption about the nature of relations between men and women: it is essentially sexual unless modified through social measures. Physical separation and the hijab are two such measures. This assumption ascribes to women ultimate responsibility for moral corruption or salvation; her actions determine the presence or absence of sexual advances. Men in this paradigm appear as powerless. They are at the mercy of female seduction, and by default carry less guilt for inappropriate behaviour than women. This was the logic behind the infamous 2006 speech by Sheikh Taj el-Din al-Hilali in Sydney when he compared relations between men and women who do not adhere to rules of modesty, with a hungry cat and easily accessible meat.5 In this analogy, men bear no responsibility or guilt for treating women as sexual objects because they simply respond to a natural instinct and the seductive lure of female flesh. Sheikh Hilali articulated a widely held view among conservative Muslims when he warned that women can be Satan's soldiers, capable of bringing down the most pious of men.

The underlying assumption regarding female seductiveness and ultimate responsibility for moral decay has led to some very extreme cases. The honour killings that are carried out in parts of the Muslim world are due to the belief that women bear responsibility for (in)decent social behaviour. Consequently, extra-marital relations
and adultery are primarily blamed on women who, to borrow Sheikh Hilali's terminology, carry out Satan's work and deserve to pay the ultimate price. This mindset allows brothers to kill their sister or mother if she is seen in this light. Honour killing may not be a widespread problem in the Muslim world, rather a localised practice, but the underlying logic that is the conceptual foundation of discrimination and the most barbaric practices against women is present, even among Muslim communities in diaspora.

The Dilemma

Muslim women wearing the hijab are pressed from two very different sides. On the one hand they suffer abuse and discrimination for representing a misogynous religion. Disapproval of the hijab takes many forms; the most sophisticated criticism comes from Western feminists who accuse hijabis of betraying their own sex and willingly subjecting themselves to oppression and patriarchy. A willing slave is the most difficult slave to free. In that vein, hijabi women who subscribe to male chauvinism and endorse unequal power relations by donning the symbol of their oppression, represent the biggest challenge to gender equality in Muslim communities. This view had significant force among Muslim feminists in the 1970s, with Fatima Mernissi articulating the argument against the hijab in her early writings. On the other hand, conservative Muslim leaders press for modesty, and ideally the hijab. From this angle, women have the potential to morally corrupt men and undermine the community. As a result, special attention is paid to Muslim women's public appearances and behaviour.

These two opposing positions share significant common ground on what constitutes the marker for true Muslim women. Both agree that the hijab is a key representation of Islam. But what about Muslim women who do not wear it? Are they less Muslim than their hijabi sisters? Do they cease to represent Islam? Is the veil the deciding factor for Muslim identity and, therefore, not wearing it would signify liberation from the patriarchal mindset of Islam, or a slide down the slippery slope of immorality? These contentious questions place significant limits on the role that non-hijabi women can play in the public debate on Islam or the hijab. The unspoken consensus appears to be that veiled women are better Muslims than non-veiled ones. The many books on Muslim women unfailingly use the imagery of
the veiled woman on their front cover; this also applies to scholarly publications. Reducing faith to a piece of clothing is a tempting shorthand that even some of the best scholars cannot resist. This view is reinforced by the media, Islamic associations and even the government when they turn to veiled women to speak on Muslim women’s issues. The veil is assumed to give Muslim women the authority and credibility to speak on behalf of all Muslim women and Islam. The celebrated author Hanifa Deen has referred to this trend as a search for authenticity. Who is the authentic Muslim?

Non-hijabi Muslim women face a difficult dilemma here. Succumbing to pressure to wear the hijab to protect their ‘modesty’ and the moral purity of the Muslim community goes against their independent self-assertion as a Muslim. For them, the hijab is not an essential part of modesty, morality or faith. At the same time, continuing to not wear the hijab is interpreted by Western critics as evidence of reform and enlightenment, which is expected to result in the ultimate rejection of Islam. But non-hijabi women have no desire to act as some kind of a fifth column to weaken Islam. This is a unique dilemma that non-hijabi Muslim women face in the West.

In the Muslim world, the question of the hijab is peripheral to more urgent socioeconomic and legal issues of equality. Feminist movements of various shades in the Muslim world, whether inspired by Islam or by the secular model of social organisation, strive to improve the condition of women. This has led Ziba Mir-Hosseini to argue that ‘Islam and feminism are not incompatible’, as secular and Islamist women activists campaign for the reform of family law to protect the rights of women and children. These women may have very different sources of inspiration: one may be an idealised view of women’s rights in Islam based on the role of the Prophet’s wife and daughter; the other may be The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the existing legal framework for women’s rights in the West. Despite their diametrically opposite starting points, these women meet on the tangible point of writing into law, protection for women. As a result, women can focus on issues of substance rather than get bogged down in their respective ideological trenches in relation to the hijab and patriarchy.

Muslim women in Australia need to be free to enjoy their full citizenship rights, including the way they dress. The unwarranted obsession with women’s dress code masks more profound and very
different challenges that relate to the future of Muslims in Australia, and gender equality in religious institutions. It is hoped that the present volume contributes to our understanding of these challenges and how we may move forward as a whole, spiritually rich and mature Australian nation.

Notes
1 Paola Totara, 'Aussie Burqini Sparks Religious Storm in France', Age, 13 August 2009.
3 ABC News, TV program, 23 June 2009.
5 BBC News, TV program, 27 October 2006.
8 Hanifa Deen, Caravanserai (Fremantle: Fremantle Art Centre Press, 2003).