

WEARING THE NIQAB: MUSLIM WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE UK

Findings Report

2015

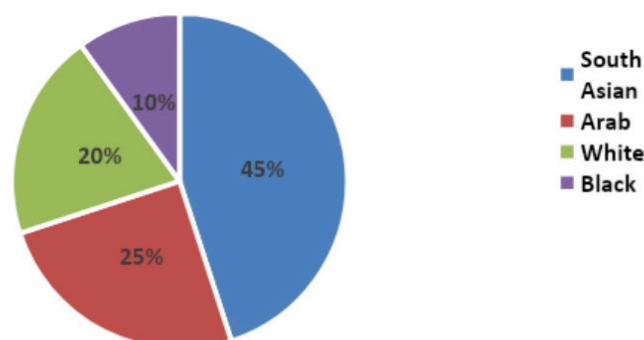
What This Study Covers

The niqab, or the face-veil, sometimes mistakenly called the burka, has recently emerged as one of the most ubiquitous symbols of everything that is perceived to be wrong with Islam: barbarity, backwardness, exploitation of Muslim women, and political radicalization. Yet all these notions are assigned to women who wear the niqab without their consultation; “niqab debates” are held without their voices being heard, and, when they do speak, their views are dismissed. As these women do not fit easily in the pernicious category of the “good Muslim,” they are particularly vulnerable to Islamophobia. According to TellMAMA’s 2015 report into hate crime, the majority of anti-Muslim hate crime was directed towards “visible” Muslim women (i.e. those wearing the hijab, niqab and other markers of ‘Muslimness’).

This report gives voice to women who wear the niqab, and sets the record straight, enhancing understanding of the complex picture around niqab and religious identity and agency. By focusing on opinions of women who wear the niqab, this study creates a space for these women to present their views regarding their right to wear the niqab, their experiences related to wearing it and their views on the way the media portrays women in niqab.

We interviewed 50 women who choose to wear the niqab in the UK. In our search for women willing to share their experiences, we visited mosques, Islamic schools, prayer groups, women’s gyms, halal restaurants, and university campuses. We also interviewed women via Skype.

Ethnicity of participants



Key Findings



- The participants came from all walks of life and while they were all positive about the niqab itself, their experience of wearing the niqab ranged from entirely positive to being fraught with anxiety about reactions of others.
- Their narratives had one thing in common: they connected their love for God with practising modesty and emulating wives of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Hence, the choice to wear the niqab was a result of a reflection on how to best achieve the highest level of piety. The niqab itself also engendered piety and a sense of a transcendent experience.

Reasons for wearing the hijab

- 84% of the participants started wearing the niqab in their teen years, and were inspired to do so by other female family members, reading Islamic texts and listening to respected scholars.
- All the participants felt that the niqab increases their strength of faith and expresses their connection to God.
- The reasons for wearing the niqab ranged from modesty purposes (70%), spiritual protection (20%), following family tradition (6%) and cultural practices (4%).
- None of the participants expressed being forced to wear the niqab by another person, although they did acknowledge that this is a factor for some women.
- 90% of the participants said their family/loved ones supported their wearing of the niqab. Most of those who did not feel supported were converts to Islam, and their family did not support their conversion to Islam overall.

Education & work



- A large majority of the participants (80%) said that wearing the niqab had interfered with their education or work, which is very disappointing. They had not felt supported and had experienced open discrimination and hostilities from educational institutions, students and work colleagues, despite being just as capable, if not more, than their peers.
- Some of the participants said their experience had improved over time, after colleagues got to know them.
- 60% of the participants had felt hostility from interviewers when attending job interviews.

Living in the wider community/society

- Many participants (60%) said they had support from members of the wider community/society in relation to the niqab.
- 62% felt confident in accessing public services, health and medical care and support while wearing the niqab.
- Many participants expressed the desire to help out in their community, in areas such as schools and local organisations, but had felt hostility when offering their help.
- Due to negative experiences by the participants and other niqab wearers they knew, most participants avoided public transport while wearing the niqab.

- 74% of the participants did not feel confident accessing political representatives (i.e. MP's, councillors) while wearing the niqab. A few of the ladies mentioned MP Jack Straw's comments in a 2006 Guardian article, after he interviewed a niqab-wearing constituent. One of his comments was "I felt uncomfortable about talking to someone 'face-to-face' who I could not see".
- None of the participants felt the niqab hinders communication in any way, and they felt it is a civic right.
- All participants worried about proposals to ban the niqab in the UK, following France and Belgium imposing a ban on full-face veils in public areas in 2011.
- The picture painted by the stories told here demonstrates that, for these women, the niqab is deeply personal, freely chosen, liberating, multilayered, and socially situated. The dynamics of niqab wearing are shaped by factors related to gender, race, language, and social space.

Media representation



- All the participants felt contemporary media representation of niqab wearers was overall very biased and unfair.
- They felt western media has certain pre-conceived notions of niqabis being submissive, forced into wearing the niqab and uneducated, which it perpetuates through its representation. They felt negative portrayal is no longer just shown by right-wing media, but it is increasingly seen in mainstream media too.
- Participants felt Eastern media, particularly Muslim media channels, presented a more balanced and fairer view of niqabis, whereas Western media often frames the niqab as a symbol of religious patriarchy and 'otherness'.

Abuse and harassment

- A staggering 90% of the participants had experienced verbal abuse because of their niqab, with 40% experiencing physical abuse.
- The majority of the victims had not reported the abuse or harassment to the police, with many saying they did not think any action would be taken.
- 92% of participants felt negative media portrayal of niqabis has encouraged Islamophobic attacks on 'visible' Muslims.

Quotes from Interviewees

“Everyday I become more niqabi, I become more committed to my niqab”

“I have always thought that it was a beautiful representation of religious practice”

“I have been mistreated while in public just doing my chores and minding my own business. People assume I am illiterate. I stand up for myself. Mostly non-Muslims have put me down and it makes me feel very low. I am someone I chose to be, and I am happy as this person. It is very annoying having to deal with such negative attitudes”

“Niqabis are often portrayed as powerless victims, whereas most women choose themselves to wear the niqab. The right of an individual to decide what to wear is a civil right”

“I have been wearing the niqab for 13-12 years. It has been totally out of my own choice to do so. My husband and family respect me for wearing it but don't support my choice. Their view is 'Why are you making life harder for yourself?'”

“In professional environments such as meetings, people have been quite patronising about the fact that I can speak in a professional manner. It is almost like they assume we are not educated”

“Being described as a ninja is very common, as well as a terrorist or bomber. Once some white people went past me and said, 'Oh look, the ninjas can speak English too'”

“Wearing the niqab is a matter of personal choice. How a woman chooses to dress whether in public or private should not be dictated by the state. I really hope the UK doesn't fall into the same trap as other European countries banning face coverings and even head coverings”.

“I do get remarks from the public when I am with my children, and it can be distressing. I've been having more issues in public, so I have been taking it on & off because I felt I wasn't fitting into the environment, and I felt like I was a target because of my niqab”

“Politicians and the media have normalised hate and bigotry so much that the average person on the street now has more audacity to act and make comments against us”

“The public needs reminding that if we are talking about rescuing or helping women, there are far more pressing issues to be dealt with such as domestic violence, equal pay, equal rights, so why all this focus on the niqab?”

“When we talk about facial expressions with respect to banning the niqab, you have no idea of facial expressions when using social networking, emails & telephone calls either! There are lots of modes of communication, with the voice being a particular mode of expression”

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