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Hijabs, feminism and hypocrisy in mainstream narratives of women's liberation

by Monia Mazigh February 8, 2018

In an era of #MeToo and #TimesUp, it is time to trust women's choices and stories in the face of all sorts of adversity. That includes choices made by Muslim women.

When it comes to women's wear, everyone has an opinion — from fashion designers to mothers-in-law, to boyfriends, to politicians, to random people on the street.

For Muslim women who wear the hijab (headscarf) or the niqab (a face-covering veil) these opinions may be even more unsolicited and can become subjects of books, movies, laws, heated family discussions, slurs on the street and even federal election campaigns **like the one we had in Canada in 2015**. If you think I am exaggerating, you need only go back four months in time and **read about Bill 62**, introduced and passed in Quebec's National Assembly, which prohibits women from receiving public services while wearing a niqab.

And if you still have doubts, you can read about the **"burkini ban" in France** during the summer of 2016 when Muslim women wearing burkinis (swim attire consisting of leggings and a dress with a hoodie) were banned from beaches.

These political decisions, whether made in Quebec, Canada, France or elsewhere, are justified by two main arguments. They are either seen through the "holy" lens of secularism or through the noble objective of women's liberation and feminism.

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secularism argument in her recent book, ***Sex and Secularism***.

As for the feminist argument, let me share some personal experience and thoughts to show how it has been wrongly used.

Even when Muslim women strongly and loudly voice their disagreement that they are not oppressed and that wearing the hijab or niqab is their own choice, they are not taken seriously or they are not heard at all.

Personally, I have heard many comments directed at me, especially from women, telling me that I am oppressed without knowing it or that I have been brainwashed by patriarchal Islamists (understood to be my father, brother and/or husband) without noticing it (perhaps while I was busy writing my PhD thesis).

Today, in the era of the **#MeToo and "Time's up" movement**, it is time to trust women's stories when they are facing all sorts of adversity. It is unacceptable that we still have issues with trusting women's intelligence and decisions, especially when those decisions happen to run against other people's desires and counter the mainstream narratives of women's liberation.

We live in a time of hypocrisy, where double standards are commonly used, especially by those who use feminism whenever its suits their personal agenda.

Last week, about 29 women decided to stand up publicly in the streets of Iran and remove their hijabs. They were protesting the compulsory hijab imposed on women since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

On social media, these women were described as "heroes" and their **protests branded as "courageous."** Even though I strongly believe that these spectacular actions play into the Western obsession with the hijab and Muslim women's bodies, I consider these actions courageous. However, on the other side of the spectrum, when Zunera Ishaq legally challenged the Harper government to be able to take the citizenship oath while wearing a niqab, she was not called "courageous" on social media. On the contrary, then prime minister Stephen Harper jumped to a simplistic justification for the hijab ban and described the niqab as **"rooted in a culture that is anti-women."**

Another example of the hypocrisy of those using feminism when it suits their agenda is the **treatment of Amena Khan**, the first Muslim model hired by L'Oréal, to star in a campaign selling hair products. A few hours later she was fired after old tweets surfaced in which she made harsh criticisms towards Israel and its policies vis à vis Palestinians. Even though I have tremendous reservations about how the hijab is being used by multinational corporations and thus becoming another marketing tool used, for instance, **by l'Oréal or H&M**, to get customers and profits, I was dumbfounded by how the loud voices using feminism here and there didn't find it outrageous that a woman was silenced for her opinions.

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of defiance, they stand to lose their freedom and this could put their life in danger, in contrast to Amena Khan losing her job in the U.K. or women unable to take the bus and visit the public library in Quebec. I agree. We should compare apples to apples and not to oranges. However, we should also keep in mind that consequences are relative to the state of the democracies we live in and if women are removed from jobs and public spaces for their appearance this will lead to their social and economic marginalization, which is not a minor fact.

During the ’90s, women in Tunisia, the country where I grew up, were persecuted because they were wearing the hijab. They were raped, verbally and physically assaulted by police officers, put in prison and some even died. Last year, the truth and dignity commission listened to some of the **survivors’ horrific stories**. All these years, these women have been suffering in silence. France, one of the main allies and supporters of the regime at that time, never called these women “brave” or “heroes” or used feminism to defend them. They were left to their fate.

Homa Hoodffar, a Canadian scholar originally from Iran who was arrested in 2016 by the Iranian regime and later released, **wrote about how Iranian women lived** under the Shah dictatorship before the Islamic revolution, and explained how many Iranian women suffered when the Shah banned the veil in an attempt at “modernization.” Many women stopped going out because they didn’t want to be uncovered. They stopped socializing and were deprived of going to places such as public baths or even working outside, thus losing social and economic status.

My point isn’t to defend some choices over others or to claim that wearing a hijab is harder or more courageous than removing it. Both are difficult and dangerous decisions depending on the countries where women live. However, it is how the same “feminism” is used to justify some actions and denounce others that deeply bothers me. I believe that “time’s up” to have all women’s decisions and stories taken seriously. We can’t pick and choose which women are worth listening to and whose stories are braver than others.

Monia Mazigh was born and raised in Tunisia and immigrated to Canada in 1991. Mazigh was catapulted onto the public stage in 2002 when her husband, Maher Arar, was deported to Syria where he was tortured and held without charge for over a year. She campaigned tirelessly for his release. Mazigh holds a PhD in finance from McGill University. In 2008, she published a memoir, Hope and Despair*, about her pursuit of justice, and recently, a novel about Muslim women,* Mirrors and Mirages*. You can follow her on Twitter @MoniaMazigh or on her blog* ***www.moniamazigh.com***

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