

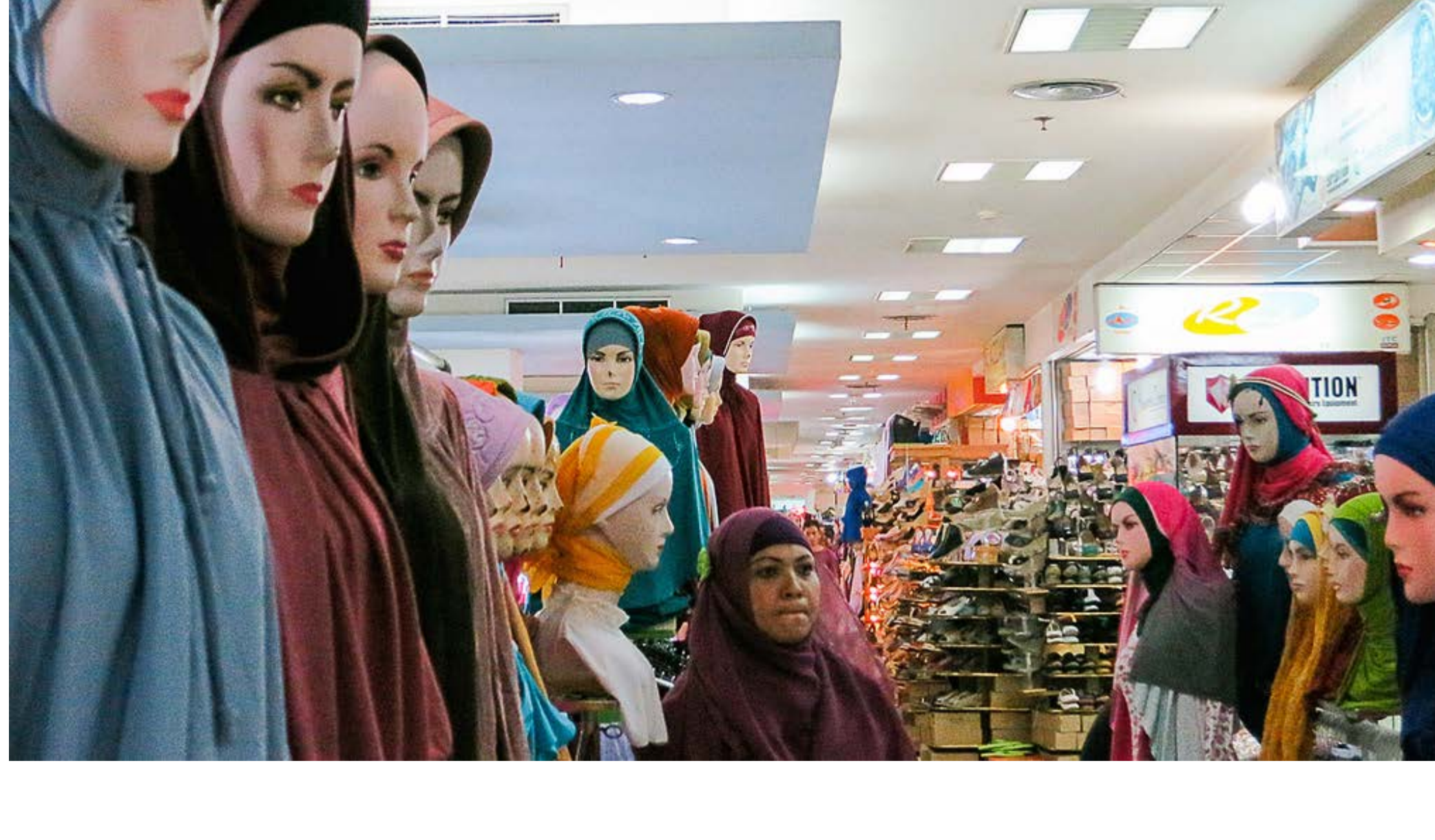


ANTI-RACISM FEMINISM HUMAN RIGHTS

What misogyny looks like when you wear a hijab

by Monia Mazigh July 6, 2018

The dehumanization of Muslim women is ingrained in people's imagination. And the common, simplistic and wrong perception that the hijab is a symbol of oppression is still alive and thriving.



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Last week, I was on the bus travelling from Gatineau to Ottawa. I was taking that bus line for the first time and wasn't familiar with the route and stops. Assuming that my stop was coming, I rang the bell, signalling my intention to get off. It turned out that I was wrong and that I was still far from my intended stop. The bus stopped anyway, and I didn't get off.

A middle-aged man standing beside me asked, "why you didn't get off?" Taking his question at face value, I replied, "it was a mistake." To my surprise, he was quick to fire back: "Next time, don't do it!"

I couldn't believe my ears. The bus driver didn't say anything to me and here is this man, a simple rider, who feels entitled to talk to me in a patronizing tone to teach me how to behave on the bus. "Don't talk to me like this," I replied to him, fuming. "Shut up," he ordered me angrily. "You shut up," I replied back. "I am going to report you to the bus driver," I continued.

In the midst of this heated interaction, a white lady stood up, got closer to me, and moving between me and the man, asked me, "is there anything I can do to help?" The whole dynamic changed. Until then, I was the "isolated" Muslim woman facing her white male bully, and now this white woman decided to break the "domination" relationship and turned it into an allyship. In matter of seconds, a Black woman joined the circle and said, lightly, "what is the problem here? I always make mistakes when requesting bus stops." Another racialized man, who so far had been watching quietly, became encouraged and said to the white man, "why are you behaving this way?" The white man was isolated and started to retreat.

No longer on the offensive, he started saying he was "just wondering." "No," I corrected him, "you were simply mean." He didn't say a word. I was still shaken, but because of the solidarity I felt surrounded with, I decided to go to the bus driver and tell him about what happened. He was very cooperative. "If you want me to report him, I can do it immediately; I can even kick him off the bus." I was not on a power trip. I was just trying to go home. I told the bus driver that this time I will let it go and then I got off. The white and Black ladies who stood by me both got off the bus; I thanked them for their actions and words, and each one of us went on her way.

This incident might look trivial, but shook me to the core, physically and morally. I thought I was much stronger than this but obviously I was not. I thought that words would come more easily to my rescue, but they were trembling and slow. I speak three languages: Arabic, my mother tongue, and French and English. It is known that in tense and emotional circumstances, when a person is at risk or in a situation of fear, she finds it easier to communicate her emotions in her mother tongue. Not only did I have to reply to this man in English but also in a manner that accurately reflected my emotions. I became so overwhelmed. Once at home, I felt I needed to cry.

Crying would help ease the tremendous anger raging inside me but also would bring me to my humanity — the simple humanity I constantly have to prove exists under my hijab.

Since the attacks of 9/11, I've felt insecure on the street; I am not exaggerating. As a woman wearing a hijab, I became an easy target for glares, rude behaviour, bigotry, and Islamophobic comments. I don't claim that I am constantly a victim. Nevertheless, fears are always in the back of my mind, and unconsciously or consciously, they shape my actions and my attitudes, my words and even my silences. The hypervigilant state I am always in drains me emotionally, and nothing can calm me down until I am at home.

Despite who I think I am or describe myself to be, my appearance speaks more quickly than me in public spaces. The decade-long hammering about the question of "reasonable accommodation" in Quebec, followed by the failed attempt to ban "religious symbols" specifically targeting women in hijab by then premier Pauline Marois in the 2013 provincial election, later taken over by former prime minister Stephen Harper during his "niqab ban" in 2015, created this atmosphere of a vigilante attitude by some Canadians.

These tactics of identity politics are not merely political experiments that magically disappear once an election is over or after a politician is defeated. They are not merely words that fade away with time; they have a long-lasting impact on people and they can lead inevitably to actions.

The dehumanization that Muslim women are subject to — either through classic Orientalist depictions in paintings like *The Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* by Eugène Delacroix or through stereotypes like the cute Jasmine character in *Aladdin* by Hollywood — is ingrained in people's imagination. The common, simplistic and wrong perception that the hijab is a symbol of oppression is still alive and thriving, even though many books have been written by Muslim women to declare otherwise.

I don't know what exactly pushed that man on the bus to ask me that question and to treat me the way he did. Is it just the fact that I was a woman? That would be misogyny. Or is it the fact that I was wearing a headscarf that invested him with the mission to "teach me a lesson"? I can't ever know for sure. However, as someone who lived through that experience, looked into his eyes and saw his expression, I have a strong feeling that he wouldn't have talked to me if I wasn't a woman wearing a headscarf.

As someone who just read that "[one in four Muslim women wearing a headscarf in New York City has been pushed on a subway platform.](#)" I do not have the luxury to give that man the benefit of the doubt. I have every right to feel insecure.

My headscarf "told" him that I was "oppressed" anyway: most likely, my husband, my father or my brother are already oppressing me, so why wouldn't he be able to do it, too? My hijab allows him to oppress me.

Moya Bailey, a queer Black feminist, coined the term "misogynoir" to describe misogyny towards Black women, where race and gender both play a role in bias. "Misogynijab" would perhaps be a term to use in those cases where both misogyny and hijab-wearing meet intersectionally.

I believe that populist politicians, with their simplistic and dangerous rhetoric, empower their bases to act upon their words. The dangers of populist politicians like Donald Trump or Doug Ford are not "simple talk" or "controversial tweets" shared in virtual platforms. The impacts of these politicians are what happens to vulnerable people in the streets, on public transit, or in detention centres. Their words are calls for actions. Their words act as green lights for some to "defend" their territories from people who seem weaker than them.

I have never considered myself oppressed. In fact, I think I am privileged. I came to Canada to pursue my graduate studies. I have a family. I have a house and I drive a car. If I didn't take the bus that day, this incident wouldn't have happened to me and I would have thought that the world is still a wonderful place and Canada the most "tolerant" city. But obviously, it is not.

Imagine I was a Syrian refugee or any other hijab-wearing woman who doesn't speak a lot of English, on the bus in the same place. What would have happened? What if the two women who offered support were not there? What if everyone else behaved like bystanders, felt unconcerned by what was happening? What if the bus driver wasn't cooperative, or worse, indifferent? Most likely, the white man would have been more empowered and even more invested with missions to defend his "public space."

When I give presentations about Islamophobia, people wonder how it concretely happens. I usually share statistics with them or refer them to examples from the media. Next time, I will tell them this story.

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 her pursuit 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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