

**Veiled Muslim Women in Australian Public Space:
How do Veiled Women Express their Presence and
Interact in the Workplace?**

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1. Introduction

In a world characterized by both open and closed geographic borders, people who meet the visa requirements of receiving States are faced with negotiating new ideas and cultural boundaries. Populations of countries receiving flows of migrants too might encounter forms of difference and similarity anew. As policy response to immigration, multiculturalism in Australia faces many challenges. 'Culture' and the norms and values that groups of people choose to adhere to condition their identity and their place in a society. Identity is a complex changing process through which we understand and make sense of our surroundings. Our sense of belonging and our striving for recognition is formed through relations between different members of a society.

In this research project I have sought to understand, engage with and present veiled Muslim women's diverse identity and their experiences at work in the multicultural city of Sydney. Veiled Muslim women today are made to represent one of the most controversial symbols in the West. In Australian society as in many Western countries veiled Muslim women face great scrutiny and attention in the media and in the academy. In this paper, I hope to give these women a chance to have a voice, a voice through which to represent themselves. Although their voices are mediated through my own, which is an inescapable aspect of any anthropological research. I hope that our mutual intention to communicate something of the experience and diversity of veiled women's experience in the workplace and broader public arenas in Sydney makes this paper a partial instance of self-revelation.

One of the first women I interviewed in Sydney, Fatima, explained how she feels the global debate on Muslim women resonates in the public in Australia:

As an Australian woman I feel it is about time that we are presented with diverse images of what a Muslim woman can achieve ... and can look like. Our society needs strong and positive images of Muslim women that can lead forward as good examples for the Muslim community as well as the Australian society. Our daughters can then walk proudly as Muslim women veiled or non-veiled in the street with their non-Muslim mates...where they no longer feel that they are misunderstood or left out in their own home ... but accepted equally as other members are in our highly multicultural and multi-religious society

In the beginning of my research I soon realized that among my informants there was a feeling of scepticism at being part of a study that explored Muslim women's issues. However as they came to know that I too was from a Muslim background I sensed they felt more at ease.

Nearly all of the women expressed a sense of frustration at having been misrepresented in both the media and in other academic studies. They did not want to be part of a study that reinforced an image of veiled Muslim women as oppressed, backwards or limited. Their clear demands upon my research made me realize how research is always a political negotiation, given our own agency and the agency of others. Objectivity is put to the test as we try to grasp, represent and critically analyze the others' points of views. Interestingly since I am not veiled the women asked many questions in return about my Muslim identity, forcing me to make a distinction between myself as an individual and as a researcher.

As I embarked on my fieldwork I was fortunate to meet many engaged and enthusiastic people who were interested in helping me investigate the topic of veiling in Sydney. Through my encounter with members from MWNNA (Muslim Women's National Network of Australia), I was introduced to other women who were keen to express the issues that concern Muslim women in Australia. MWNNA works for Muslim women's needs and advocates for greater awareness on Muslim women's rights in Islam as well as for better communication and bridge building between Muslims and the wider non-Muslim community. They also facilitate the formation of interfaith groups.

In the course of my research I attended various seminars and meetings that introduced me to some of the public voices within the Muslim community regarding women's issues. I was fortunate to interview them to converse on many aspects of Muslim women's lives, choices and Islamic identity in Australian society. In total I conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with Australian veiled women. All the women were well educated and held different professions from professors, psychologists, teachers to marketing managers. My main focus centred on the experiences the women encountered in the workplace, how they felt about their Muslim identity, and veiling as a marker of that identity. I also sought to ascertain how they understood the role of woman in Islam.

These questions deserve particular attention as we live in a political environment in which Islam and Muslim women especially have come under a scrutiny that is too often misguided and based on generalizations. In this environment it is the Islamic veil that has been the focus of attention, and connected to oppression and fanaticism. These stereotypes clearly have an influence on people's perceptions and formation of opinions. All of the women I talked to expressed the need for more diverse representations of Muslim women. I therefore think it is important to shed light on and explore the changing identities among Muslim women in Australia who are constantly forming new images while challenging the homogenized ideas that exist.

There has been much research on Muslim women and the veil. Its wearing has been dissected in every possible way, being connected to religious affirmation, cultural marker of the feminine, political strategy and segregation and oppression (Cooke 2005). However there is little research on the experiences veiled women encounter in the workplace in Australia, although there is some research that examines discrimination and statistics on the number of

women who are employed (Bouma 1996). In wearing the veil, Muslim women in Australia are claiming a distinct identity in public space through their visual Muslim identity. As they interact with the general public new ideas and perceptions are formed and negotiated between non-Muslim Australians and Muslim women.

These negotiations also occur between Muslim women themselves. The variations among Muslim women's dress have rarely existed side by side as we see today in many of the big cities in the West. Colourful veils are combined with the latest fashion. While Western women receive the message through popular culture that being desirable and beautiful means being less covered, Muslim women are encouraged to put the veil on. In both cases the female body and her choice of clothing represent not only the distinctiveness of culture but also contested values and norms in that particular culture.

One of the vital contextual politics impinging on interpretations of the meaning of the veil is the perceived threat of Islamist terrorism and radicalism, seen as posing a threat to Western democracy. Muslim women as cultural bearers are seen by many to represent that dichotomy. The tendency to perceive veiling as an image of backwardness and oppression can be linked to the orientalist assumption that modernity cannot be reconciled with Islam (Benton 1996; 15). In Australia as in other Western countries multiculturalism seems to reach its limit vis-à-vis Islamism, where choices regarding political practices and religious values and norms become the marker of one's identity. This occurs as minority cultural practices and sets of values collide with majority standards of both cultural practices and norms. In the last few years there have been numerous examples of how Muslim women have been said by political figures to be victimized by their own religion. Ex-Prime Minister John Howard expressed concern about Muslim attitudes towards women when he said, "I think some of the associated

attitudes towards women (are) a problem” (The Australian, George Megalogenis *February 20, 2006*). He has also said that Muslim people need to respect Australian values such as equal rights for men and women. In this context it is interesting to note that both Muslims and Australian – note the distinctions – are presented as homogenized groups rather than as individuals with diverse view points.

In this thesis I intend to reveal my informants’ accounts of their experiences in public space and work and how they integrate their Islamic identity with them. Additionally I have attempted to explore how these women think about women’s position in Islam. To do so in Chapter One I will first discuss the discourse on women in Islam from a theological perspective. This is because of the important correlations between what Muslim women in Australia believe and practice, and their knowledge of the Islamic sacred scripts. My quest in this chapter is to understand what theological traditions and male theologians have said about women in their interpretation of holy scripts. Because Islam is a religion interpreted and understood differently by different people, the gender roles notion in Islam too have been interpreted and practiced differently, setting a foundation for how people understand their own gendered identity. According to Islamic feminists, Muslim women have been oppressed because of a patriarchal cultural that is still ruling in many Muslim countries (Mernissi 1996), even if it has been the interpretation of Islam by the male elite that has supported these states.

I will then go on to discuss how women and men who are advocating for Muslim women’s rights have come to revise sacred texts as a foundation for re-evaluating some of the ideas about women’s role and status in Islam. Muslim women in Australia are heiresses to these interpretations. In my second chapter I look into veiled women’s experiences at work and how they integrate their Islamic identity in the workplace, and engage and interact with people at

work. Finally in Chapter three I will discuss the complex motivations for choosing to veil and what the meanings of this garb represent for some Muslim women in Australia.

Note: in the thesis I will use the term the veil and *hijab* synonymously, because the literature uses both to describe the material covering women's heads. The term 'veiling' is of course used to describe other types of covering that are customary in many different cultures, which might include the face as well as the whole body (Mernissi 1996, Barlas 2002, Doogue 2005 & Bouma 1996) However throughout my research experience I noticed that Australian Muslim women used the Arabic term *hijab*, the veil as well as the headscarf synonymously.

2. Women and Islam

“Women are the twin halves of men”

The Prophet Muhammad

(Minai 1981; 3)

The variety of women’s lives in Muslim majority countries, the various projects of secularism and nationalism pursued by their elites and others, and the migration of Muslims to every corner of the globe means that a discussion of the relationship between Islam and women is in one way an impossibly large and disaggregated subject. Nevertheless, this has not appeared to discourage Muslims in many places from discussing just that topic – that is from making connections between Islam and how women should live. In this chapter I want to emulate both some of those Muslims and some of my informants by attempting to do what they do. That is to say, the most common method through which my informants and many others articulate Islam and women as objects of a single discourse is through constructing a dialogue between authoritative texts and problematic human experiences. This is a dialogue between the rights of women as interpreted in inspired texts and the actual conditions of women’s lives. However the partners in this dialogue are not of equal status. On the one hand there is a tendency to treat the inspired texts as universally applicable across time and place. On the other hand we have the variety of women’s lives and experiences, radically differentiated by class, nationalism and migration. In general this potential disjuncture is averted by the privileging of the authoritative texts of revelations and what they say about women’s rights and obligations in Islam.

Emulating this privileging of texts, in this chapter I too will first briefly outline central aspects of the texts of Islam. I will then examine how the Prophet Muhammad came to be an example to Muslims in his companionate treatment of women. Then I will discuss the complicated nature of the authoritative Islamic sources and how some sections both from the Koran and hadith/sunna have been misread and used to oppress women. Finally I will look at these texts and Muslim feminism, and how Muslim women, writers, activists and academics advocate for women's rights. This group has used holy script to challenge existing interpretations regarding women's position and status.

Within the discourse on Islam and women many scholars and feminists argue that the position of Muslim women can best be understood through a scrutinization of the Islamic teaching. However the nature and the complexity of orthodox Islam (like any other religion) make this a difficult task. Further the Islamic view of women is derived through specific interpretation of Islamic sources that constitute a massive body of literature containing diverse traditions of the Islamic theology. Comprehending the position and the status of women in Islam leads one by necessity to engage with these theological and legal discourses. This is a complicated field that requires a good knowledge of theological Islam. To properly engage with these discourses one is obliged to re-examine many volumes of sacred script in order to begin to grasp the complexity and the conflicting status of women's rights and responsibilities within them.

Thankfully this is not my task. By contrast, I will discuss selected Muslim writers' work that illustrates the vexed question of Muslim women's role in their scrutiny of Islamic sources. Their scrutiny of the interpretative sources that deal with women is a complex task, because the scriptural texts have been interpreted differently in regards to women in the many Muslim

societies and communities. Further, Islam is understood and practiced in different ways and interpretation of the text is depended on who's reading it, with what objective in mind, from what point of view and in what culture and time. Many Muslim scholars have pointed to these factors as crucial in producing textual meanings as these changing dynamics have been determinative in the production of knowledge on Islam.

Further and unfortunately sacred texts have been used and still are used to curtail the rights of Muslim women. This legitimized discrimination toward women in the name of Islam has led to a broader engagement and advocacy form Muslim feminists who wish to redefine and contest religious texts that have been historically and traditionally interpreted, produced and distributed to the common people by a male elite who wish to preserve the subjugation of women. Related to this it is also important in my opinion to address questions about women and Islam from the point of view of Muslim women themselves, both from more liberal interpretations to conservative standpoints. One can only understand why some Muslim women claim it is Islamic for women to refrain from lingering in public space or to cover her hair when going out, through knowledge of what orthodox Islamic norms and guidelines require. Likewise there are conservative Muslims who insist that women should not work and even advise the avoidance of certain professions. In other words the choices Muslim women make in their lives are conditioned by what those with knowledge and therefore power over the Islamic scriptures decide is true Islam. This does not imply that there is only one answer to issues but it provides a general understanding of the context in which Muslims operate in order to claim an identity through Islam. Muslim women shape and construct their Muslim identity through multiple norms and guidelines including from specific understandings of Islam. Perhaps the more relevant question here pertains to the question of where Muslim women receive their Islamic knowledge and from what tradition.

2.1 The Revealed Texts

Muslims believe in the unity of one God referred to as Allah. The Koran is the holy book, and the *Sunna* is the prophet's sayings and deeds (Roald 2001; 109). The Koran is the central source of Islamic legislation, and its believed to be the word of God as revealed to the prophet Muhammad (Roald 2001;107). In the Koran the believer is encouraged to emulate the Prophet's way of conduct. In addition to the *Sunna* there is also the *hadith*, collections of the prophet's "saying, instructions and proclamations" as recorded by his family and companions. The *hadith* is "basis of the Sunna and second only to the Koran as the source of doctrine and practice" (Lippman 1995;79). The *hadith* is a textual source that has been subjected to doubt and scrutiny about its authenticity since the early days of Islam. The amount of *hadith* literature as recorded by the early Muslims was overwhelming. The recordings went through a process of review in the ninth century (Roald 2001; 110).

In time "a science of criticism of hadith" was developed. The methodology applied in assessing the authenticity of a *hadith* was based on the *hadith* narrator's relation to the Prophet or his companions (ibis; 110). The *hadith* recordings were either discarded or accepted on the basis of two criteria: "the content (*matn*) of the hadith and the chain of narrators (*isnad*)" (Roald 2001; 110). Muslims established two further sets of standards: *Hadith* were "successive or multiple (*mutawatir*) (more than three/alternatively nine narrator chains), and isolated (*ahad*) (less than four/ten narrator chains)" (Roald 2001; 110). Finally every *hadith* fell into the category of authentic (*sahih*), good (*hasan*), weak (*daif*) or refused (*mawdu*) (ibid; 110).

This highly complex division of *hadith* recordings is overly influential for interpretations of women's position and status as interpretations often depend on which *hadith* are chosen.

Roald argues that the *hadith* are determinative in the debate on gender relations.

Certain *hadith* have been classified as isolated yet have served to legitimize social practices and form. On the other hand the tradition and use of *hadith* has been criticized by several contemporary Muslim scholars, such as the Egyptian Muhammad al-Ghazzali and Islamic feminist Riffat Hassan. Al-Ghazzali rejects the pervasive use of isolated *hadith* as authoritative (Roald 2001; 110).

The Koran on the other hand is regarded by Islamic scholars as literally the word of God although a full understanding of the Koran is usually seen as complemented by the knowledge of the *hadith* literature (Roald 2001, 110). This is because there are many aspects of social and legal relations that are not well specified in the Koran. One example is the alms tax: the Koran does not clarify how much the believer is supposed to give or to whom. Similarly the Koran mentions that the believer should pray, but not how many times or with what ritual: it is the *hadith* that clarify these matters. (Lippman 1995; 79 & Roald 2001; 110). Likewise the roles or attributes of women are not treated explicitly in the Koran, so it is the *hadiths* that are used to clarify aspects of women's life.

Based on this empirical diversity in textual Islam, Roald discusses these matters in relation to Muslims in the Western context. She argues that those *hadith* that deal with women reflect the views of traditional society, so the question is "how these should be understood today" (Roald 2001; 111). Roald states that the hardest challenge for Muslims is found in the different movements' interpretations of the *hadith* (Roald 2001; 110). A second challenge in regard to women has to do with the *hadith* and social change. Contemporary Islamists who write or

teach on women are faced with questions of contemporary relevance, questions that Muslim scholars and feminists too have to take a position on. Roald believes that the individual interpretation is inevitable and in this sense she concludes that both the conservative and the Islamic feminist are selective with the *hadith* literature (ibid; 113). As a result Muslims draw their conclusions from different *hadith* sources, which results in different outcomes in regards to women.

Let me give one example of the way the textual material is interpreted and fought over. The scholar Siddique is a Muslim male academic who has devoted his study to the question of equality between men and women in Islam. His particular focus has been on investigating the misinterpretation of verses both in the Koran and in certain *hadith*. He argues that Muslim scholars have throughout history misinterpreted certain verses and thus concluded that men are superior to women. Here is a verse from the Koran:

Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel over the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great (vers 4:34, altafsir.com).

The Koranic verse 4:34 in particular has been read and understood in a way that clearly places a hierarchical division between men and women. The core ideas in the verse according to the traditionalist view are that “men are guardians (*gawwamun*) of women and hence their rulers” and therefore “Women must obey their husbands if they are to consider themselves good Muslims” (Siddique 1988; 14). Other writers like Roald and Barlas have also argued that this verse have been subjected to serious misinterpretation. Roald notes that there are other Koranic verses that clearly place emphasis on the equality between men and women, for

example: “The believing men and the believing women are protectors (*awliya*) to the other” (K.9:71), or “It is He who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it brought into being its mate, so that man might incline (with love) toward women” (K.7:189) (Roald 2001; 146). Roald states that it is clear that many verses that speak about equality and compatibility between men and women have not received the attention they deserve.

Siddique argues that this hierarchical interpretation of the position of women in relation to men has been adapted in many Muslim societies, making “women second class citizens in their homes” (Siddique 1998; 14). In addition to this famous verse, Muslim scholars have used other *hadith* that support the subordinated status of women. Siddique also claims that some of these *hadith* have either been fabricated or taken out of their context (ibid: 14). He specifically argues that those views that are supposedly derived from the verse 4.34 are not correct as regards to the true teaching of Islam (Siddique 1998; 15). He supports his argument by clarifying those principles through which the Koran should be read and understood. These principles include the correct *tafsir* (interpretive method) of the Koran, where the verse is not to be taken out of context. Nor should the Muslim ignore what the Koran says about the same subjects in other verses because the Koran has to be understood holistically. The second principle concerns time frame, since the Koran was revealed to the Prophet over a period of years. Therefore the last verses on any matter must be taken as the final ruling on the subject. Another important aspect to keep in mind is that the Prophet’s example in life is not to be ignored, and that the interpretations of the Koran must cohere with the prophet’s life (Siddique 1998; 15).

2.2 The Prophet and Women

In the last 30 years or so, scholars and Muslim female writers have returned to the Sunna seeking evidence for equality between men and women. The Prophet's tradition has been essential to the current debate on equality between men and women; the manner in which the prophet treated women has been constructed as an ideal. The Prophet Muhammad came to be known as the messenger of Allah and the Prophet of Islam; he received his first revelations in 610 AD. During this time he was married to his first and only wife Khadija, a successful businesswoman who was much older than him. Many documented writings mention the distress suffered by the prophet in the period of his initial call. The Prophet sought support and strength from Kadija, and she was the first person to adhere to Islam (Mernissi 1991; 102).

The Sunna, the tradition of the prophet, is rich in description of how compassionate and considerate the prophet was to the women in his life. The women who lived closed to the prophet played an important role both socially and politically in the establishment of Islam. Islam came to be a religion that took up the rights of the weak and the poor. The religion spelled out the rights of women clearly and for its time, it appears that the status of women was an improvement over previous gender relations. Women were encouraged to seek knowledge, and if she worked had the sole disposal of the money she earned (Minai 1981; 4). Women were now legal heirs to their father like their brothers. In marriage certain rights were stated, like sexual satisfaction and financial support. In divorce she was entitled to financial compensation (ibid; 4). These rights may now seem minimal but according to Islamic history, in the tribal customs of the seventh century women held a much lower status in these areas.

From this époque there are many examples that confirm women's active role in society. One is the famous story of the Prophet's beloved wife Aisha who led an army and fought Ibn Abi Talib, also known as the Battle of the Carmel (Mernissi, 1991; 5). In the *hadith* texts Aisha holds a prominent status for Sunni Islam, and she is portrayed as a strong character who took part in political disputes (Roald 2001; 119).

2.3 Women and Work

Traditionally Muslim women have worked in the domestic sphere. This tendency has changed in Muslim countries as societies have come to need women in the workforce and as education have been emphasised by the State. However there has often been an intervention from the religious elite regarding what they call work that suits woman's nature. One example from Saudi-Arabia is that many professions are simply prohibited for women, such as judges and the political field, as legitimized by the religious clerics. Further conservative jurists and scholars have come to conclude that women have to remain obedient to the husband from the verse 4; 34. Additionally as we have seen there are *hadith* that support this hierarchical relationship between men and women. One of the *hadith* that is not known as authentic (*sahih*) has often been taken as evidence for women's obedience to her husband: "If I were to order someone to bow down to someone, I would order the woman to bow down to her husband" (Roald 2001; 172).

Roald states that although this is not a strong *hadith* it can also be argued that its content contradicts the Islamic message that humans should only bow to Allah. Nevertheless, her experience in her fieldwork was that many Muslim women she had spoken to insisted that a wife's obedience to her husband is essential (ibid; 173). Further it is in the *hadith* literature that one finds support for the belief that women's primary role is connected to the domestic

sphere. The Koran also states specifically that men are the providers economically for women and children. Accordingly many conservative jurists and scholars conclude that women's lives should be limited to the domestic role entirely.

On the other hand, Amina Wadud has observed that in the Koran the social role of women is not specially stated and therefore one cannot conclude that the domestic role is primarily reserved for women simply because men have the obligation to be providers (ibid;179). Siddique has argued that there is evidence in the *hadith* that women worked in the public sphere during the Prophet's time and helped to maintain the economy with their husbands. The Prophet himself supported a woman's work as she could do good deeds from her economic activities (Siddique 1988; 81). Roald says that gender roles among Muslims stems from prevalent ideals in Islamic sources and that these again are closely connected to the time and situation of their composition. She says that when "circumstances change, attitudes are modified to fit the existing situation" (Roald 2001; 184). Muslims in this regard understand the texts from within a culture and are inevitably formed by it. It is interesting to note that although Muslim women through education participate in the work force in many Muslim and Western societies their strong position in the public sector is perceived by many conservative Muslim men as a threat, as they see this as un-Islamic.

2.4 Religious Texts and Misinterpretation

Many Muslim feminists and writers have trained themselves to engage in the theological field and examine religious texts that have been used by conservative male scholars and the ruling elite in Muslim societies to legitimize women's lower status with a scared stamp. The attempt to reassess what Islam says about women has never been as pressing or as prevalent amongst Muslim scholars, writers and academics as they are today. The accusation from both Muslims

and non-Muslims that Islam is incompatible with women's rights and that the Koran condones male superiority has forced a great focusing on this question. Additionally in the Western context Muslim women's position has become a broadly debated issue, which has also contributed to a reassessment of what is Islamic and what is cultural. Muslim women are in a broad sense more engaged in assessing this challenge than ever before.

One prominent Muslim academic Asma Barlas investigates the role of women in Islam. In her book "Believing Women in Islam" Barlas examines the domain of religious texts, focusing on the hermeneutics and epistemology that has been applied by Muslims to understand the holy book, the Koran. She sets out by asking essential questions, and tries to solve the mystery of the assumed correlation between patriarchy and Islam. Her initial question is simple: "does Islam's scripture, the Koran, teach or condone sexual inequality or oppression?" (Barlas 2001:1). This question refers to the image of God, whether God is represented as a male figure and whether women are perceived as the other that is weak and sinful. As a contrasting question she asks "Does the Koran permit and encourage liberation for women?" (ibid; 1). Barlas argue that it is Muslims who are responsible for the misreading of the Koran and who have oppressed women on false religious grounds. Laila Ahmed also describes women's situation to be a result of "fundamentally different Islam's" that originate from different readings. Barlas shares this view and believes that there is a possibility to retrieve what Ahmed calls the "stubbornly egalitarian" voices of Islam and to utilize this approach as a legitimate defence against its authoritarian voices (Barlas 2002;2). Both Barlas and other Muslim writers urge women to engage in interpretation and re-examination of the texts that deal with women (Barlas 2002;3, Mernissi 1991;24). Several scholars within the discourse on Islam and women have concluded that inequality and discrimination stem as well from

secondary religious texts, the *tafsir* (koranic exegesis), and the accumulated legal rulings rather than the Koran. (Barlas 2002; 3).

Further Barlas criticizes male readings of the script and hold them responsible for the misogynistic attitudes that dominate the *sharia*, where the legalization of sexual inequality is stated. She argues against this idea and says that “the description of Islam as a religious patriarchy that allegedly has “God on its side, confuses the Koran with a specific reading of it” (Barlas 2002; 4). In her view since the Koran is polysemic like any other text it can be understood in numerous ways. Too often the Koran has been “ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary and psychological context and then been continually reconstructed in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors” (Barlas 2002;5). Not only do we have to investigate who has read it but how they have defined the “epistemology and methodology of meaning” (ibid; 5).

The production of meaning of the Koran (for Muslims) is in the main reserved for Muslim interpretative communities. Barlas admits that her claim that the Koran is egalitarian and anti-patriarchal is a difficult standpoint to prove. In the first instance the Koran prescribes different roles for men and women in “marriage, divorce which is perceived as a source of inequality evidence “(Barlas 2002; 5). On the other hand, Barlas also argues that prescribing different treatment to men and women does not necessarily translate as treating them unequally. On the other hand, it is clear enough that certain inequalities like polygyny and “wife beating” and the position ascribed to men as the “locus of power and authority” (Barlas 2002.6) are derived from the Koran. Barlas explains away these aspects by reference to the pre-Islamic traditions that inevitably have left their traces. Yet recognizing the “existence of a patriarchy is not the

same as advocating it” (ibid; 6). This background has led to a selective and uncritical reading of the Koran that has been historically reserved for men.

Anne Sofie Roald, a Norwegian writer who has converted to Islam, has conducted much research on women in Islam with a particular focus on the Western context. In her book “Women in Islam” she investigates the conflicting interpretations regarding women’s roles and status in Islam of various Islamist movements. Coming from a Norwegian background Roald is interested in how Muslims in the western context integrate and understand Islam. She argues that the encounter between Muslims and the West has forced Muslims to rethink certain attitudes towards women and re-examine the position of women in the Koran. On the other hand, it cannot simply be that the encounter between Islam and the West that should be held accountable for changing interpretations. Christianity too is conflicted about the role and status of women: for example there has been a bitter debate on female priests in Lutheran Christianity, with their barring from ordination perceived by many as discrimination against women. Similarly the Pauline order that declares women should keep quiet in congregations (1 Corinth. 14:34-5) has in Scandinavian countries been used as a supportive argument that no woman can be a spiritual leader of a Christian congregation (Roald 2001; 118). Despite this interpretation the rise of Christian feminist theology and hermeneutic approaches has meant that there is now a female priesthood in these countries. This is an example of how religious scripts are subject to interpretation and change by people. Roald argues that in Islam the tendency is similar: In some Muslim countries women are not allowed to work as judges because many scholars have confirmed that this job is not suitable for a woman’s nature. They legitimize this referring to the Koran’s teaching that women are only worth half a man on the witness stand (Minai 1981, 69).

Another andocentric interpretation within the Islamic context is how *shura* (consultation) has been interpreted as a solely political concept. However in the Koran the concept of *shura* is advised to be used in family matters as well. In the issue of whether the mother should breastfeed or not, the parent of the child are advised to take council (*shura*) in each other. Roald argues that certain verses that indicate a power differential between men and women have been taken up and used more than other verses that talk about the marital relationship in mutual love and tenderness (Roald 2001;119). In brief it is important to note which verses are emphasized, what status they receive, and who agrees and points to their importance. These are the important questions one needs to address when asserting the position of women in Islam.

2.5 Feminism and Islam

Muslim women, activists, writers and poets like women everywhere have advocated in different ways for women's rights before the colonial West made it its duty to free them from patriarchal culture and above all from Islam. The first Muslim women who started advocating women's rights and reinvestigating the foundations of Islam in order to achieve social change for Muslim women did so from many different political positions. What they had in common was the placing of women's issues on the agenda.

This plurality continues in the present day. Today some Muslim feminists believe in social change for women and that that change can only be achieved through an Islamic framework. Others reject this compatibility and argue that Islam has core aspects that are oppressive towards women. Different Muslim women have also approached this struggle for change with different objectives in mind. Some have strictly followed the traditional ideal of Muslim women's role, where women's place is firstly connected to the home. Others on the other hand

argue through Islam that Muslim women ought to have the same opportunities as men and point to women's emancipation during the Prophets time.

Although Muslim women's writing had been mainly absent in the history books about Islam, since the end of the nineteenth's century Ottoman and Qajar women have contributed to this field, even if their voices did not receive the same publicity as other male reformers. However in recent times and somewhat ironically many Muslim Arab women's writings have changed from a secular to a more religious discourse. As oriental women took up the fight for equality it was impossible for Muslim women to ignore what Western feminism had achieved for women's social change. In her book "Women Claim Islam" Meriam Cooke analyzes different positions from which Arab women came to work from in their quest for change. She investigates how some Muslim women sought a voice through the appropriation of Islam, and how others manoeuvred the holy script to break the tradition that women were made only to serve God and her family. She identifies how many of the writers developed a unique ability to dissect the theological sources to support women's emancipation in all domains. Some of these women reject the term "feminist", while others act as feminists without labelling themselves thus. Finally others see the term as compatibility with their work through their production of a more liberal Islam.

Cooke argues that feminism embodies more than a culturally specific term (Cooke 2001; 3). "Feminism is much more than an ideology driving organized political movement, it is an epistemology" (Cooke; preface). Feminism is about depicting injustice in the name of gender, a universal feminism that rejects any kind of patriarchal subjugation. Within the feminist debate regarding Muslim women it is the position and status of the woman that has been the main focus.

2.6 Conclusion

Interpreting Islamic texts and making recommendations about human practice on the basis of them is a complex field that contains many minefields one cannot escape. In this field many crossroads present themselves as possible roads for understanding Islam's prescribed ideals for women. However the identity and the role of women in Islam cannot be attributed to one category. Other factors such as culture and socio-economic background are influential in determining Muslim women's position. In investigating the sacred sources it becomes clear that conflicting views in regard to women depend on what interpretation one applies. As Muslim women become more active in the scrutiny of texts, it seems that their struggle for equality can progress. It can be said that Muslim feminists are utilizing the oppressor's tools as means to their goals, which is both diplomatic and politically strategic.

3. Working with the Hijab

**“Tell the believing women to
Lower their gaze and be modest,
And to display of their adornment
Only that which is apparent, and to draw their
Veils over their bosoms”**

The Koran, Chapter of the Light

(Brooks, 1995:130)

Women wearing the *hijab* have become a common enough sight in Australian cities today, and are understood as a widespread symbol of Islam in public space. In the multicultural city of Sydney, ‘*hijabi*’ women are becoming more visible at schools, universities, hospitals, and other workplaces within the public sector. As Australian non-Muslim and Muslims interact in various arenas in the public realm, challenges, misunderstandings but also bridge building strategies are created. The wearing of the *hijab* by many young Australian Muslim women in the public realm has evoked reactions both from supporters and opponents. Therefore it is crucial to scrutinize the dynamics involved in the intersections between the identity of Muslim women, the *hijab* and the broader public domain.

Muslims as a religious minority in Australia have not always been as well-known by the broader non-Muslim Australian populace as they are now, nor represented so notoriously in the media. However after the attack in America on September 11, 2001, and the growing number of asylum seekers seeking to enter Australia, Muslims and Islam were suddenly under a different form of scrutiny. The media’s focus on what began to be represented as ‘Islamic

issues' escalated as the political conflict between certain Western and Middle Eastern States evolved. Many words or phrases related to Islam, such as the concept of *jihad*, *sharia* law and the veil became obsessions for policy makers, as they were presented as alien ideas divorced or completely different from 'Western' notions such as the 'Just War' theory, the veiling of nuns or canon law.

At the same time, the exaggerated portraying of women in black veils by the media (subtly or otherwise) attributed forms of subservience to their wearers. And of course the visibility of the veil makes Muslim women much more easily recognized in the public sphere than male Muslims. Media representations of Muslims led to created stereotypes: according to Hanifa (2003), the term Muslim and Arab equalled 'terrorism' and 'fanatic' or 'extremist'. On the other hand and as my research shows, the veil is also a political medium used by many Muslim women to demonstrate the presence of Islam in the Western liberal world where women's rights and equality have supposedly reached their peak. As much research has shown, many Muslim women choose to put on the veil themselves, complicating simplistic notions of their lack of agency in wearing the *hijab*.

In this chapter, I want to explore the experiences of veiled professional Muslim women who work in non-Muslim environments in Sydney. I will examine how they integrate and negotiate their Islamic identity within the workplace context. As my research will show, veiled Muslim women who work and live in a non-Muslim society are forced to operate within and adapt to contrary realities. After many conversations with professional women, it became obvious to me that each had their own individual, complex experience of what is involved in working in a non-Muslim workplace. Their Islamic identity seemed far from a homogeneous one. At the same time, the women's commitment at work to Islamic practices such as praying, fasting and

veiling was experienced differently inside the workplace. Because their professions varied, these practices presented different challenges for each of the women.

Before detailing some of my findings, it will be helpful to summarize very quickly the various ways that the role of Muslim women in Australia vis-à-vis working outside the home is presented and debated. Opinions within the Islamic community are divided. We might identify at least three discourse orientations, the traditionalist, liberal and neo-modernist. Of these three the traditionalist view is the most publicly aired, although ironically it is probably also the least practiced by Muslims in Australia. The ‘Traditionalist’ discourse seems to be more engaged in the representing of Muslims in Australia (Saeed 2003:159). Women who express the traditionalist view understand the role of a woman to be first and foremost limited to the home. They believe that women’s main task is to care for their children and husband, which they affirm is the norm according to Islamic classical law. They also see segregation as beneficial for the communities’ welfare, and urge women to wear the *hijab*, which covers both the hair and neck and sometimes the face as well. The ‘Traditionalist’ women believe other women who do not cover are not adequately religious (Saeed 2003:160).

By contrast, the liberal view opposes the traditionalists, arguing for the need to advocate for Muslim women’s rights, and for the full rejection of male oppression. They see the veil as simply a symbol of old patriarchal curtailment (ibid; 160). The neo-modernist view and the women who support it believe that Islam does not oppose women’s rights. According to this perspective, the Koran and the tradition of the Prophet are fully supporting of equality between men and women, Believing that Muslim societies have misinterpreted the role of women in Islam, neo-modernists urge women to participate in the society as independent individuals (Saeed 2003:161). Interestingly, most of the veiled women I talked to seemed to

support important aspects of this neo-modernist position. In particular they often referred to the gender equality of the prophet's time and how women participated equally in society then.

Many scholars utilize the discourse on gender to explore the correlation between broad-based cultural constructions of gender relations on the one hand and the more restricted subjective or personal negotiation of gender relations on the other (Bartkowski 2000: 397). The usages of *hijab* can be understood on these two levels as well, both as a manifestation of constructed religious and cultural gender, *and* as a subjective negotiation of gender relations by their wearer. Similarly, "theories of discourse suggest that cultural forms like gender, religion, ethnicity are best understood as constructed, contested and intersecting social phenomena" (Bartkowski & Read: 2000:397). These scholars argue that the meanings ascribed to the Muslim veil do not inhere in the veil itself, but that the essence of the veil is produced through cultural discourses and immense networks of social relationship (ibid; 397).

3.1 Work, Veil and Religious Practice

Many women's experiences and feelings of belonging as practicing Muslims in the workplace and in public were characterized in the first instance as those of success and pride. However working as practicing Muslims was a challenge in regards to certain needs. The professions that my research subjects held ranged from teachers, biochemist, pharmacist, and administration managers in private companies to library assistant. All the women I interviewed were practicing Muslims committed to Islam and all women worked in non-Muslim environments. The *hijab* seemed to be an important aspect of their Muslim identity. In general they understood the *hijab* to be empowering and many concluded that being veiled and an active professional proved that wearing the *hijab* did not hinder women from achieving what they want. All interviewees expressed a feeling that non-Muslims possessed

misconceptions in regard to the *hijab* and women in Islam. In their own opinion these misconceptions were a result of simple ignorance. They also blamed the media for projecting a subservient image of Muslim woman to the broader community.

This feeling of being misunderstood as members of a religious group was clearly a theme that made the women frustrated and angry. However the majority of women believed strongly that positive changes would appear in time. Most believed that the increasing number of Muslim women actively interacting and engaging in the Australian society would change people's stereotypes. The veil seemed to be a visible factor that created attention, either negative or simply as a challenge: all women had various experiences where colleagues asked questions about the *hijab*. They all believed that the wearing of the veil provoked curiosity about women's oppression, since each was asked to verify that veiling was their choice.

Nevertheless, it was striking that interviewees felt that living as a practicing Muslim did not affect them negatively in the performance of their job. Nor did they seem to feel obstacles within the workplace were due to their Muslim identity. Indeed, all felt that they had good relationships with co-workers. In the following sections I have broken up the concerns and experiences of my informants into four topics. When discussing the answers of my subjects I will also relate their points of view or experiences to more general debates about women's roles and Islam that illuminate some of the opinions being expressed.

3.2 Sexuality, Mobility and the Veil

One of the issues concerning both Muslim theorists about the role of women in Islam and therefore – directly or indirectly – my informants is the question about women’s sexual vulnerability outside of the protected domain of the private sphere of home and domesticity. Muslim conservatives who support veiling tend to base their insistence upon it on an assumption about women’s sexual vulnerability, applying this as one of the main reasons why women should keep themselves out of the public sphere (Bartkowski & Read, 2000: 405). Historically, the veil has been connected to women’s restricted mobility, signifying a physical exclusion from the ‘outside’ world. The prominent Muslim feminist Mernissi draws a parallel between the veil and the institution of the Harem, tracing both to a medieval religious heritage. “In Muslim society the harem is the domestic space which is under the authority of the head of the family” (Mernissi, 1996:50). She understands these concepts to be prevalent in many Muslim societies even if the institution of the Harem no longer exists and women have access to the public workforce (Mernissi, 1996:50).

For Mernissi, the *hijab* involves three dimensions of overlapping significance: “the first is a visual dimension: hiding from view, the root of the verb *hajaba* means to “hide.” [T]he second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a boundary, establish a threshold. [T]he last dimension is ethical, that relates to prohibition” (Mernissi 1996:51). The last element is a non-tangible concept that is intertwined with the other two: “a space hidden by a hijab is a forbidden space” (Ibid; 52). In her study on women’s work in Morocco, Mernissi finds that the ideal and the reality of women’s ‘place’ do not correlate, especially in rural and poorer communities. Her findings suggest that “ many men across the Arab world still feel insulted if one asks them whether their wives work outside the home” (Mernissi, 1996:64).

Significantly, this attitude has changed over the decades in many Muslim countries where women have come to constitute a greater part of the workforce, contributing significantly to the production of national income as women assume a more active role in the wider economy. Nevertheless, there are some Muslim countries where women are more secluded from the public sphere. This segregation between males and women has been legitimized through a conservative view of Islam. Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan are countries where women are segregated in the domestic sphere and where women are required to cover their entire bodies and veil their faces as well (Saeed, 2003:168).

The women I interviewed did not condone this aspect of women's lives, nor did they support the idea that women should be secluded to the domestic sphere or that the veil was initially meant to hide women. On the contrary for them the veil signified respect and control *over* public space. Most of the women I talked to emphasized that education and work was important and completely compatible with Islam. A few however said that once a woman gives birth her primary role should be with the child, which they saw as an obligation that Islam placed on woman. In their view, there was no hindrance in being both a committed Muslim and an eager professional or even a very social person outside the home. Most women gave the impression that the veil made them feel stronger as feminists in public. Thus Hadda who worked at a Microsoft company said:

When I started wearing the veil, I felt more in control and protected, men didn't look at me in a sexual way, I felt respected and that made me feel more comfortable working with men.

All the women I talked to emphasized that the veil was simply a religious manifestation. Their freedom in public space was not hampered in anyway; most confirmed that they felt comfortable and proud with the veil on. The matter of visual difference was something they had gotten used to.

The common questions women received from co-workers in regard to the veil seemed to be of similar kind. Zubeida who worked as a child care educator said:

I feel sometimes that their questions are typically projecting their own views... like, is the veil forced upon you? I feel that some questions are not asked out of simple curiosity but out of prejudiced opinions, I mean. There is nothing I can say to convince them, because they have already made up their mind, it is frustrating.

Seher who works in city bank as a complaints officer said:

It's hard to explain at times, being Muslim I have to give up something's in this life in order to be rewarded in the life hereafter. It's difficult for them maybe to understand this aspect. Like I gave up swimming which I loved when I started to wear the veil.

All participants confirmed that their relationships with co-workers were good and that they were appreciated as professionals; however the matter of the veil seemed to be a subject for suspicion and questions. Thus Aisha who works as a researcher in pharmacy at University of Sydney and is a tutor as well at University of Sydney said in a firm voice;

They ask if the veil is forced by the family or husband.. I know that they like me and respect me for my professional performance; however I feel they would like me more without the veil. They will never understand...even if you explain hundred of times, that it was your choice to suppress your beauty

Aisha started to wear the veil at the age of 19 years old; her family advised her to wait until she achieved what she wanted in her career. However she persistently stayed by her choice, even when family member further told her that she will have a hard time finding a job in a pharmacy with the veil, and that she might force customers away. I could feel a slight note of indifference in her voice as she continued to emphasize that she had to take the choice in regard to her veil and her Islamic commitment at an early stage of her life. She says:

With time I proved them wrong, I have completed my PHD successfully, I hold a profession today where I am highly recognized and respected, now even my students remind me about my praying times. They are used to me being different ... The thing is we can't all be similar, we will always have our individual differences.

3.3 Socializing with Co-workers

The Australian workplace naturally constitutes many aspects of the mainstream culture that can be incompatible with very religiously committed Muslims. For example, committed Muslims would find attendance difficult at the Friday drink at the local pub, or the Christmas parties where alcohol is present and other events where both men and women socialize outside of work hours or professional business. Many Muslims perceive some of these social gatherings as un-Islamic.

Looking closely at my participants relationships with their colleagues, it seemed to be limited to the workplace. The women emphasized that their Islamic commitment was incompatible with non-Muslims way of socializing, especially because it involved alcohol. However, most of the women felt that co-workers treated them with respect and inclusion.

One of the women Seher who works in city bank said:

I think it's nice to be invited to social gatherings, and I enjoy their company, however it is a hard dilemma at times, because being a Muslim woman with the hijab, I feel it's wrong to be seen in settings where alcohol is present. I mean people would think that it's ok for a Muslim woman to be in pub or even a private party. I am constantly aware of how I behave even how I talk, walk and interact with people because I do represent all Muslim women with the hijab. Both Muslims and non-Muslims will judge me according to my conduct, and my conduct will be represented as Islamic.

Zaineb who works part-time as a psychology therapist doing marriage counseling and is a teacher part time said:

The usual Friday pub is just not an alternative, but they always ask me, which is nice, but they understand it's not part of my religion. I like to attend gatherings, but you know... alcohol is a big part of the Australian culture, and I don't feel comfortable in those settings. Also being veiled I represent Islam, other Muslims might think bad of me, and non-Muslims will get the wrong idea of what is permitted in Islam, or that it is okay for a veiled woman to be in a pub.

As I talked to the women, it became clear that they were placing limitations on themselves in accordance with their religious dictates. Despite the social inclusion experienced as coming from co-workers, many aspects of socializing seemed unfitting with their Islamic identity.

In this context, being social outside the workplace was limited because of awareness about what is permitted and what is prohibited in Islam. In addition, I also sensed that an individual interpretation of Islam was present. Appropriate conduct was not only a matter of being correct according to Islam, but also a simultaneous wish to conform to and preserve an image of the Muslim veiled woman. The veil here appeared connected to the social conduct of the women who positioned themselves as representing the boundaries of the religiously and socially acceptable attributes of being a Muslim woman.

3.4 Praying at Work

Praying at work during working hours was not a convenient practice to participate in.

However the women did have different opinions about this issue, which to some degree was connected to the type of profession she was engaged in. Not all workplaces could provide a spare room for prayer, while in some jobs it was not permissible to take five minutes off because of the specific responsibility of the job.

Sara who worked as teachers confided about this matter:

Working as a kindergarten teacher one has a lot of responsibilities and I can't just leave the kids and pray, so I do all my prayers home. I don't see this as problematic at all.

The women who had their own offices could spare 5 minutes for prayer in privacy, however other who did not have that freedom and flexibility at the workplace could not pray. In addition the women felt differently about requiring the need for prayer. Few of the women saw this practice as highly important and specifically requested it from the employer, although the majority said that it was not a problem for their religion to leave prayer for home. As one woman who as a complaints officer in city bank said:

I don't want to seem too pushy, I mean they already accepted my *hijab* and I just don't want to ask too much from them. Besides Islam allows me to be flexible, and as long as I do my prayers at the end of the day, God is forgiving and understanding.

Kadija, a teacher shared similar view:

Religion is a sensitive matter in our time, so I do not want to demand to pray, they already see me as different. I do my prayers at home, where I have the facilities needed, also the place needs to be clean, I just don't want to take my personal faith to work.

Ifi, a middle aged woman who works at Sydney university library said:

I do my prayers when I have a little spare time, its not a problem at all for either my employer or co-workers, there is a praying room now at university, but the students and the Muslim staff had to fight for it, back in the old days things were more strict. I used to work in a bank and the employer told me straight out, we do not accept traditional cloths or the veil, at the time I used to wear the same as I wear now, sarwal y kamez, I just had to use 'western' clothes during my working hours. They also didn't allow saris...things were different then... A few years ago after my pilgrimage to Mecca, I put on my hijab, my husband started making silly comments like, take it off. People might think we are terrorists... I told him; well it's about time they know there are Muslims in this country and this is the way they dress

Ifi go on to say (laughing):

My co-workers asked many questions when I put the veil on, being used to me in traditional clothes still, I just told them I am an old woman, I have too much grey hair, some people color it, I cover it.

Ifi seems very relaxed about these issues and say that times are now a bit better, as there are more Muslims, and Australians in general know more about Islam. She says that although the media depicts Islam negatively, there are many understanding and open minded people as well. Her story is interesting because it sheds light on the social change in Australian society in regard to Muslims being recognized as a religious and ethnic group.

3.5 Interaction with Male Colleagues

All the women I interviewed stated that their relationship with male colleagues was more distant because of their being veiled, and hence more restricted to professional work issues. However friendly their relationships were with male workers, many said that jokes or private matters were not part of the relationship. As Halima who works in construction management explained to me:

I do handshake out of politeness with the males-colleagues, but I noticed after putting on the hijab, a lot of men stopped initiating the handshake. In general I feel that even males who don't know anything about Islam respect you more and distant themselves physically when you are veiled.

In general I found that the women's interpretation of the effect of the veil on social relations with male colleagues ranged from issues involving social interaction with co-workers to its complicating of simple social gestures such as greeting male co-workers with a hand-shake. However most women simply explained that, "In Islam I am not allowed to shake the hand of a man I am not related to," although a few avoided explaining this to their male colleagues for fear of being impolite. In this way the veil transformed into a physical separation between male co-workers and the women. But most of the women also said they felt more comfortable in their interaction with men, because the *hijab* restrained sexual flirtation or the sharing of inappropriate jokes. Laila who works in city bank said:

The relationship with male colleges is restricted to the professional, for example they wouldn't crack jokes, or do certain body languages. I feel more at ease after I put on the veil because they respect me and more importantly, they know their limits.

Laila further says:

Before I put the veil on I felt that the limits and boundaries were more fluid between me and males. Even with my husband's friends who were Muslim I felt that the limits were blurry, for example in regard to jokes and physical approach, even friendly hugs were a matter at times of confusion. The line is drawn when a woman puts on the veil ... things become clear; everyone knows their place according to the Islamic law. Now, whenever we have dinner parties, naturally we women will be in one room and the men will be in another. I mean it's not like totally segregation, but it's just more comfortable.

The interview with Aziza was one that fascinated me the most. Aziza Abdel Karim is the president of MWNNA, an organization that represents multicultural Muslim women in Australia. The organization comprises diverse members from different ethnic backgrounds,

who range from lawyers, accountants, corporate managers, journalists, teachers to home managers. The Network cooperates with other Muslim organizations in the region and internationally. This Network helps meet Muslim women's needs in various places.

Aziza's background is Egyptian, and she is a middle-aged woman with a strong personality. After I have heard her speak in a public seminar about the Prophet's companionate way of treating women and her critique of the imam's lack of will to address these matters in Friday sermons, I was not only impressed by her knowledge but with her honesty. Aziza has lived an interesting life and devoted herself early in her career to work for social justice. Aziza used to be teacher in a public secondary school, but her experience as a teacher in the 1970s and 80s (when Islam was still unfamiliar to the larger community) appears to have been a formative political experience. Working as a schoolteacher where Muslim pupils were a minority Aziza also sought to support and help Muslim girls and boys with their problems and needs. Aziza's relationship with her colleagues changed over time as they disagreed on matters of cultural difference and integration in regard to the girls. Aziza tells me:

We had a backlash, from a completely sympathetic attitude among many of the staff to accommodating the Muslim children's needs, in Ramadan for example, we did not have the small exams ... or allowing the girls to swim in track suit, or in home science, allowing them to take the food home, and we saw positive responses, the girls took part in everything ...the girls were integrating well ... This change was not appreciated by some staff members, who wanted complete assimilation, and were threatened by these changes

Aziza tells me that in this situation her passion for providing knowledge about Islam grew, so that she even set up Arabic classes for staff members and to give more information on basic knowledge about Islamic culture, particularly on the matter of the veil or 'Islamic dress' and other customs Muslims practiced. She also introduced Arabic and Islamic scripture classes for the girls. However the atmosphere between her and some co-workers worsened as certain the

teachers and the principal did not like Aziza's approach in managing the cultural difference.

At this time, Aziza was a practicing Muslim but she did not wear the headscarf. In Aziza's words:

As a Muslim woman in those days you had to be strong and stick to what you believe in, Muslims were not well organized at all. I was forced to reflect on my Muslim identity on a higher level due to the interaction with non-Muslim's that lacked knowledge about Islam; in this relationship, I became an mediator for the shaping of a new kind of identity for the Muslims growing up here.

Aziza's relationship to her co-workers worsened, as even the deputy principle was against her. Aziza tells me in a serious voice:

It broke my heart the way some of the teachers treated the girls, one girl was even slapped, and these were just poor children coming from war zone. I felt I was their only chance, I had to stand up for them ... I would see the girls in the hall walking looking all depressed, and one episode after the other told me that this stigma was conducted intentionally ... I tried to talk to the teachers and principal, but nothing changed.

Aziza tells me that at one stage, she became ill and had to undergo invasive medical treatment; after she came back she encountered more upsetting news. One of her pupils had quit school, and when she tried to find out what happened by talking to the girl and her parents, Aziza was told by the girl that she would complete her AHC from home:

I asked, shocked, why; She told me that she was harassed because of her veil; I told her; you can complain ... there are laws that support you; the poor girl continued to tell me that she was afraid, because her brother had been mocked by a teacher at his school and he pulled a knife on him, this led to his expulsion, and she said they will probably think that this is just a violent and problematic family ... I didn't know what more to do

Another incident that tested Aziza's patience was a Turkish girl who was not accepted by the school because of her veil:

This girl was dressed beautifully in a navy-blue uniform with the matching veil, and she had told them she could not take it off because she was very dedicated to Islam and hoped to teach Islamic scripture in the future

After these incidents Aziza tells me:

I just had enough, I was very angry and the only thing I could do to support the girls was to put on the veil ... to tell them you are not alone

Aziza tells me that her main motive was resistance; resistance to the racism she felt was aimed at the girls and her:

When I came the first day with the veil, I received many suspicious looks, some asked why I put it on, I said I wanted to....if anyone has a problem with it tell me to my face

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, veiled Muslim women's experiences at non-Muslim workplace can be characterized as a diverse and complex one. The veil seemed to serve different intentions. Although the religious aspect was a primary motivation, the social and cultural dimension implicitly alluded to was also very important. Veiled Muslim women can be seen as individuals who announce their Islamic conviction publicly, like a Sikh man with a turban or a Christian nun. However, the veil in the Western context is now imbued with more than a religious meaning, as was seen through the participant's interactions with non-Muslim Australian. The suspicious and biased ideas about the veil were an important factor in co-workers' questions about the veil.

4. Motivations for Veiling

In a globalized world where according to some (i.e. Samuel Huntington) cultures or civilization complexes are clashing more than ever the Islamic Hijab has evoked much attention across and within the borders of the West and the Orient. Both the supporters and the opponents of the garment that has become a conflicting symbol are equally engaged in the discourse on women and Islam. At the same time it appears that more women are deciding to wear the Islamic veil in the Western world. For these reasons there is a need to understand and depict the motives informing this decision, to ‘figure out’ why women are voluntarily choosing to veil. We also need to understand why many outsiders seem to think this is an unconscious oppressive choice. Much research has been devoted to these issues in order to show how complex and diverse the meanings of the veil are for wearers. From an anthropological framework it is crucial to represent Muslim women in the first instance in and on their own terms, given the discipline’s priority towards grasping the ‘truth’ from the others’ many points of view.

However in the main, the veil as a symbol of an oppressive and /or violent Islam has tended to dominate popular representations. At the same time the political climate is warmed by concepts such as “the war on terror’ where Islam, once perceived as a foreign ideology, has now become a part of the Western world to which it poses a threat. Further ‘cultural conflicts’ between some Muslims and Western host countries has unfortunately resulted in a very negative representation of Islam and Muslims. Terrorism in the name of Islam has become daily debated news, in the process creating fear among the general Western non-Muslim public that leads to further misconceptions and stereotypes. Likewise it is creating fear and frustration among Muslims who live in the West. Many of these Muslims have become part of the ‘West’, as the children of the first generation of migrants constitute a whole new group

that indeed ‘belong’ to the West. In this so called clash of cultures at home women seem to be major actors and the focus of attention.

In a time and context where Western mainstream political discourse perceives Islam to be misogynistic and violent the Muslim woman’s garb has become a test for modern and liberal standards. Further, comparisons to western women has been inevitable, given the matter surrounds the female’s dress and body. Veiling for women is often understood as an institution that segregates or isolates women. I think it is crucial to focus on the total meanings that Muslim women give to the veil in different social contexts, and more importantly to give ‘voice’ – as much as I can – to women who choose to wear the veil in Australia. By doing this one does not only focus on the disadvantages that veiling might bring to women and can draw more complex conclusions.

4.1 Veiled Muslim women in the West: Oppressed or Liberated?

In this chapter I will discuss the various motivations for veiling from my participants’ point of view; I seek to address their understanding of the veil in the Australian social context. I will also look at how they feel about the focus veiled women have received in the popular media. Secondly I will address those aspects of veiling and female sexuality as understood in Islam that might be closely related to my informants’ views. Finally I will look at identity and the veil, arguing that its wearing is a political performance closely related to the current political situation as experienced and imagined by my informants.

When discussing concepts like Muslim women and veiling it is important to note that one is obliged to take notice of how patterns in the discourse has formed around these issues. One group that has launched a serious attack on the institution of veiling were Muslim feminists,

as seen in the prominent writer Mernissi who understands the root of veiling as intersecting with the reorganization of space. Although there has been immense differences in the degree and strictness of segregation, with the onset of reforming Kemalist regimes in the 1920s women were encouraged, and sometimes even forced, to move outside these prescribed boundaries. Nevertheless, the convictions that supported the 'old' allotment of space were still held by many, among whom the veil became a necessity. Mernissi says that the "veil reveals a collective fantasy of the Muslim community: to make women disappear, to eliminate them from communal life ...and to highlight their illegal position on male territory by means of a mask" (Mernissi in al-Hibri 1982; 189). For Mernissi the veil allows women to encroach upon the male sphere without being seen (ibid; 189).

This view has been elaborated further by many other writers in the feminist discourse; Abu Odeh (1993) for example investigates the complex pragmatic devices of the veil for Arab Muslim women in Muslim majority contexts. In her research veiling also seems to empower women, because it acts to deflect male attention from them in the public sphere that women find disturbing. In public space where women are maneuvering around, going to work or to university, and where they are dependent on public transport and walking in the streets, being veiled offers protection and empowerment (Abu Odeh 1993; 29-30). The challenge of sexual remarks and harassment becomes less of a problem when women are veiled in contrast for women who are un-veiled. She says "public exposure of this kind has never been more comfortable for women in Arab cities" (Abu Odeh 1993; 29). Odeh's findings confirm that veiled women in Egypt were more likely to be 'respected', in this case meaning not harassed by strange men. Similarly when they did make public complaints back they received more sympathy from the crowd (ibid; 29-30). She says women have more 'right' on their side when veiled: they are able to use the public discourse on female modesty to shame men. Odeh's

arguments are interesting in the sense that they shed light on the pragmatic solutions that the veil offers women in societies where women's bodies are still perceived as alien in male dominated space and are thus connected to the home.

Interestingly in my interviews with veiled women in Australia I see a parallel with Odeh's arguments, somewhat surprisingly since her setting is Arab Muslim countries and mine is a non Muslim context. Most veiled women said that men respect you more when veiled, although they did not mean by less sexual harassment but rather a greater distance that men showed them when veiled. Thus one of the women who works in construction in management which is male dominant arena said:

“Veiling protects the woman outside her home ... I work with mostly men, and we used to joke and talk about private things as well ... but at times they would cross the line ... when I started using the veil I noticed a big change ... men were more respectful and distant themselves”

This concept of protection against and respect from men seemed to be present in all of the women's comments. Although sexual harassment was not a problem the idea that men would respect and distance themselves prevailed. Odeh says it is a paradox that veiling, which according to fundamentalist ideology was meant to hide women from public view, has become the device that protects them in public and gives them more opportunities to move around (Abu-Odeh 1993; 33).

4.2 Media, the Veil and Muslim Women

Just as in Muslim majority context, in the West too the Muslim woman's image and body has evoked much attention as Muslim women have been portrayed in various media situations as victims of sexual hypocrisy in the name of Islam. One notorious example was the short film made by Theo Van Gogh, which depicted abused Muslim women who had Koranic verses inscribed in their bodies and were asking God for a clarification of the meanings of their encounter with male violence (Macdonald 2006; 7).

Understandably this film created intense anger and hostility among Muslim leaders in the community in Holland, as it was seen as racist, as an insult towards Islam and as an exploitation of the Muslim female body. The immediate screening of the film ended when the director was assassinated by a Muslim in Amsterdam in November 2004 (ibid; 7). This incident created a panicked and hysterical debate in the popular media about Muslims and integration: it also asked the question whether Islam itself could be the problem. A second recent image projecting Muslim women that was perceived as offensive by Muslims in England was a touring exhibition of "the veil" that created a digitally-produced image of the statue of liberty in a Burqa holding a Koran in her hand. This image was forbidden by a city council in the English Midlands (Macdonald 2006; 7).

After the 11th September attack there have been more incentive and interest in taking up the issue of Muslim women's varied situations. The topic however has been dominated by the issue of veiling, which has undermined the diversity of Muslim women's' identity (ibid; 7). Unfortunately these events create suspicious attitudes among the western majority, because what is often represented in the media is the voice of extreme groups and not the moderate. One can say that the extremists' conduct is made to represent all Muslims when that person or

group is associated with Muslims, and thus it becomes inevitable that stereotypes are created through media projections.

Abu-Lughod (2002) likewise finds the covering of Muslim women to be a fixation of the West especially in the aftermath of September 11. At least for some, the attack on the WTC left them in shock and in need of explanations for what could have triggered such an action. The attacks also created intense anger and political sanctions towards ‘radical Muslims.’ The US war against the Taliban was partly legitimized through a discourse on Muslim’s women’s rights. As Laura Bush explicitly framed it “because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes... The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Abu-Lughod 2002; 784).

Muslim women’s rights and freedom have been therefore recently championed by Americans as they have made the blue burqa a symbol of the oppression the West claimed they were committed to eradicating. Although the dress code of Afghan women and the Burqa became part of the political conflict, Abu-Lughod reminds us that the Taliban did not invent the Burqa: she notes that it was simply a customary way of dressing among the Pashtun women, one of the many ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Likewise the burqa was simply one of many other forms of covering (Abu-Lughod 2002; 785). Interestingly not all the women threw off their “cover” after the Americans “saved” them (Lughod: 785). The burqa signified women’s space, being as one anthropologist put it “a portable seclusion.” It represented women’s respect and modesty and assured women protection in the public from forms of harassment (ibid; 785). Abu-Lughod criticizes the Western assumption that takes ‘our’ notions of female freedom to be the standard of every woman in the world. Further she says that if the cover signified respect and modesty “why would women suddenly become immodest” (ibid; 785).

Her point is directed to the social value ascribed to women's (and men's dress), which is shaped and formed differently in every society. Abu-Lughod draws an analogy between "the tyranny of fashion" in the US, saying that American women are not completely 'free' in their choice regarding dress code either. (ibid; 786)

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Finally Abu-Lughod notes that this fixation from a Western perspective is not a new phenomenon. Throughout colonial times, there is evidence that illustrates how the colonizer attempted to change the colonized through various means. Macdonald describes this as "the metaphoric desire to "unveil" alien cultures, by "laying them bare" and bringing them into conformity with the ideological norms of the dominating power" (Macdonald 2006; 9).

Lughod warns against the intention of 'freeing' Muslim women, and says "we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's freedom, even if we object to imposition of this form as in Iran or with the Taliban" (ibid; 786)

In my own research I sensed that the women were very much frustrated by the media image projecting Muslim women as subservient and oppressed and the Islamic veil as associated with and attributed to backwardness and tradition. Additionally they felt that non-Muslims with whom they interacted often had various prejudiced ideas about the veil, which they felt denied their own agency and freedom of choice. Many of the women felt strongly about changing the biased knowledge people had about Muslim woman and the veil in Australia. One of the participants (who was in the last stages of completing her psychology degree) told me how stereotypes about the veil and Muslim women had affected her personally. 'Nursel' says:

The image people have of veiled Muslim woman is always ... silent in black and submissive... we Muslim women ourselves need to actively

change this, why?...because we need to take responsibility for that projected image...there has been many sisters that have suffered oppression and restrictions from their family or men, unfortunately this has been often conducted in the name of Islam... I choose to veil because of my faith, but it does not mean that I cannot be an independent woman. Islamic history is full of great role models...Islam does not hinder women in achieving their goal with the veil or without. I am very active and engaged in the Muslim community in Auburn ... I attend many seminars and forums through the discipline of psychology... most of the times there are no Muslims. So I make sure that every time I stand up and make a comment or ask questions, simply to break the stereotype that a veiled woman is silent...for me it's a drop in the ocean but it's needed.

This feeling of being misunderstood or rather of knowing that people share a certain biased opinion about the veil was a factor that all the women I spoke to seemed to be affected by. Younger women seemed more optimistic about changing stereotypes in regard to veiled women than the older women. Lila said:

I think people's stereotypes about the veil is being challenged as they get to know us and understand it's a simple difference that does not have to mean we are oppressed or weaker as women simply because we choose something different.

Zina however felt differently:

With the veil you stand out of the crowd ... it's hard at times ... the way some people look at you puts your self-esteem down, I do feel intimidated by some of the questions.

This experience of how non-Muslims are imagined as perceiving them as a religious group was one determinative factor in the women's sense of belonging and in their sense of integrity. The media's projection of veiled women as victims however seemed to be a stronger influence that most women feared had a greater impact on the image of themselves. Thus in general it seems that the women's reflection of their identity is related to the majority's perception of them, because we are all in search and in need of positive representations to identify with and to feel that we are recognized and our choice is validated and respected.

According to Dooge, in the literature veiling for women has been explained from various theoretical positions, from accounts of its socially constructed oppression, to stressing its political resistance, to a focus on the identity claims made by women (Dooge, G 2000; 206-208). However Dooge also argues that in this broad debate the issue is translated too often as a matter of cultural relativism; here difference gives rise to questions like whose cultural practices are 'better' and who is more liberated than the other?

Somewhat similarly, Minow (2000) says that the debates on cultural conflict in the West have focused on women as central actors and on their clothes as symbols of the traditional and foreign. In the case of Muslim women the hijab has become the emblem of an 'otherness' that needs to be dissected. In terms of cultural clashes in the Western countries where 'foreign' practices or customs have been subjected to scrutiny and even condemnation, it is women who have captured the attention although men are as much involved in the production of these practices. Minow asks how far contemporary or democratic societies "should accommodate minority members' cultural practices that are at odds with the majority" (Minow2000; 125). Among the practices that Minow lists as being perceived as alien and non-acceptable are female genital cutting, arranged marriages and forced use of the veil or scarf. It is interesting to see that Minow claims veiling belongs to the same category as infibulations. If true, it can be argued that the reputation of the Islamic veil has become so negatively resonant that it creates a great challenge for the wearers before it can be understood in 'new' terms.

Much research has depicted this preoccupation with women's bodies and roles in a context where different cultures meet. Women are said to hold the "...burden of representation as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively" (Yuval-Davis 1997; 45). The notion of representing the

collectivity closely relates to my own research findings, as many of the informants said that they were representing ‘all Muslim women’ simply because of their garment. Most of the women felt the need to preserve the ‘right image’ of a veiled woman, by not attending general social activities, like social gatherings at the pub, an issue I discussed in the previous chapter.

4.3 Identity and the veil

The women I interviewed all felt that they were ‘Australian.’ At the same time they also identified closely with their identities as veiled Muslim women. These women were acutely aware that this later, more obvious aspect of their identity did not correspond easily to mainstream Australian culture. In the words of one woman:

I am an Australian Muslim woman, my father is of Anglo-Saxon background and my Mother is from Oman, I started to wear the hijab when I was 21 and suddenly people started perceiving me as a foreigner, at the counter I find people speaking slowly thinking I don’t speak English, I think its amazing how ignorant people are about Muslims in this country... its like they don’t believe you can be Australian and Muslim at the same time.

Sara tells me that she was forced to learn more about Islam after she started wearing the veil as she found herself in a position that required answers because of people’s curiosity and questions that challenged.

People today have many stereotypes and judgments about Islam, and therefore many of their questions needs to be answered carefully I had to read closely the Koran in order to answer certain matters for example where the hijab is mentioned and why women have to veil, when I first started using the veil I didn’t know where in the texts it is said, but after encountering many questions I had to be prepared... also I had to rethink my own motives for the use of hijab

Veiled Muslim women in Australia are faced with the same challenge as other women in other Western countries where Islam have come to represent the unfamiliar. Roald (2004) has

conducted research among Muslims in Sweden, and makes an interesting parallel between the veiled Muslim woman and the veiled nun. She understands the scepticism about veiling to result from a fear of difference of the 'other', whereas the nuns' veiling is perceived as 'normal' because it does not represent another group's practice.

As much research has shown, women's active choice in veiling is not only the result of any single social change but bears complex pragmatic significance. Additionally throughout the Muslim world the personal clothing choice is very diverse (Doogue & Kirkwood 2005; 205). Veiling today has transformed 'traditional' meanings and women who choose to wear it themselves challenge stereotypes as they engage actively in the discourse themselves. In countries with Islamic law such as Afghanistan, Saudi-Arabia and Iran many women are currently protesting against the mandatory veil and understand the veil and other related policies directed at women to be aspects of institutionalized oppression by male leaders in order to exclude women from the public sphere. Doogue emphasizes that veiling is only one component of Muslim women's identities: she confirms however that "veiling is the most salient emblem and women the newest actors of contemporary Islamism" (Doogue 2005; 204). It is a symbol that reconstructs the opposite of Islam for the West. Also "it represents difference and resistance to the homogenous and egalitarian forces of western modernity." Veiled women, who constitute a major part of a fragmented Muslim diaspora, are emerging in a new light, forming identities that merge already hybrid and contested Western and Muslim selves.

4.4 Female Sexuality and the Veil

Mernissi (2000) discusses female sexuality from what she claims is an Islamic point of view, identifying a correlation between an assumed active female sexuality and the necessity of it being controlled. One of the prominent Islamic scholars Imam Ghazali (1050-1111) has described how sexuality within the social order of a Muslim society should be manifested. According to Mernissi, in Ghazali's interpretation of Islam, sexual desires must be restricted in order to meet the needs of humanity. He says "if the desire of the flesh dominates the individual and it is not controlled by the fear of God, it leads men to commit destructive acts" (Mernissi 2000;20). Through the regulation of sexual desire man is obeying God. For Ghazali female sexuality is disruptive and an all-absorbing power, therefore women's sexuality must be controlled "to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties" (ibid; 23). This interpretation of how sexuality in Islam should best be practiced and understood by Muslims is closely connected with the concept of veiling. One of the first Muslim male feminists (Qasim Amin) connected this concept of sexuality to the existing segregation and veiling that women are compelled to follow. In his view the important question was "who fears what in such societies?" (Mernissi 2000; 22). Amin's provocatively asks "If what men feared is that women might succumb to their masculine attraction, why did they not institute veils for themselves" (Mernissi 2000; 22). What men fear is *fitna* (disorder or chaos). Yet according to Mernissi *fitna* can also be translated as a beautiful woman. Here a powerful female sexuality is responsible for any non-permitted sexual interaction between men and women. Mernissi says in societies where seclusion and surveillance are utilized the implicit concept of female sexuality is active and therefore women have become the ones responsible for preventing *fitna*, or chaos. From my own findings a variation of this idea of female sexuality and attractiveness was present.

For example, several of the women emphasized that because female sexuality is powerful in the sense that it is a source that attracts men, the veil can therefore be understood as a pragmatic and solution creating sexual order in public. Hajar expressed this matter in an explicit manner:

“In my opinion the hijab is closely connected to human sexuality, God created man with a strong sexual desire. The man is easily tempted by female beauty. And therefore the veil for the woman help men control and restrict their sexual desire... the veil protects both women and men from committing sexual sin”.

Interestingly, younger women seemed more sure that women’s sexuality was a source of temptation for men more than the older ones. For my younger participants it was important to be modest, including covering the hair and wearing loose attire that does not reveal the female body. This was so because as many said literally, “it helps men restrict their sexual desires. It is interesting to note religious leaders’ understanding of this aspect of woman’s sexuality in Islam. One of the conservative leaders Taj Din al-Hilali in Sydney has made scandalous remarks about the Sydney gang rapes, by claiming that the attackers were not entirely to blame. In a sermon he said:

If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside on the street, or in the garden or in the park...and the cats come and eat it ...whose fault is it, the cats or the uncovered meat? The uncovered meat is the problem” (The Australian, October 26, 2006).

The sheik further said that “women were “weapons used by ‘satan’ to control men” (ibid) and that “If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred” (Ibid).

Although these remarks outraged the general Australian public as well as liberal Muslim community leaders, it is interesting to note that the sheik's comment implies that women's sexuality and beauty is a threat for men, therefore women's place should be in domestic space and the hijab is a necessity for her protection from harassment of men. Although I would not make a parallel between the women's remarks and the sheik's utterances regarding the gang rapes, there is a similarity in the focus on the hijab as a protective medium in public space. Clearly the women's views stem implicitly from a conservative philosophy.

Interestingly I found that all the women replied similarly when asked why Muslim women should veil. The answer was simply for protection. This idea of men versus women's sexuality struck me as odd. Neither did I sense this aspect early in my research to be an important part of women's motivations or understanding of veiling. When I asked "protection from what", most said protection from male sexual harassment, or simply from flirtation. It was following this logic that one of the women said something that disturbed me:

When a woman is veiled she earns respect from men, I mean in this society it's gone too far, you see women wearing miniskirts and skimpy tops, no wonder there is so much rape"

I asked the woman to make sure I understood what she was implying. Does veiling in general prevent rape I asked? She said;

No, I mean that women's sexuality is so powerful and men's behaviour is more restricted when a woman is covered.

This comment is closely connected to the idea that women are responsible by being sexually attractive. Veiling served as protection from any form of male misbehaviour or sexual

harassment and in this sense the women felt they achieved more respect in the wider community.

However I noticed that the older women especially didn't particularly make this correlation.

One of them said:

“The veil is a minor part of Islam; it is simply complementary to all aspects of being a Muslim. I do believe men might as well be flirting or seducing women with the veil as without”

Another woman said:

The veil puts a barrier between a man and a woman automatically.

Interestingly the women emphasize that the veil was necessary for woman's protection outside the domestic sphere. And the idea that women were vulnerable outside the 'protected' space again reinforces the idea that veiling is understood to be the marker of the "home". This is very closely related to what I have discussed earlier on the discourse on women, Islam and veiling.

Geraldine Doogue (2005) also sees a correlation between Muslim women's dress and the mentality around female sexuality in mainstream Muslim societies, which she believes to be the push factor for the pervasiveness of veiling in both the West and the Muslim world (Doogue 2000;204). She says that "Muslim women are again being encouraged to be anxious about their bodies, to believe that the public space is better for seeing less of them" (ibid;207). She makes a parallel to the Western feminist journey, which epitomized women's liberation through a rethinking of how women themselves thought about their sexuality. The Western feminist quest had come to realize that "women impose self-regulation to protect the public

realm from their sexuality” (Doogue 2000; 206). Doogue boldly concludes that women were made responsible for being beautiful: “it was their fault if men abandoned their good judgment in the pursuit of pleasure” (ibid; 207). In her assessment of Muslim women and the veil, Doogue encounters multiple motivations behind the act of veiling. She confirms that the existing diversity in the dress of the Muslim women is evidence that one can not attribute a single reason for veiling.

In my own research the various motivations women had for veiling was related to different aspects of their identity. The concept of veiling seemed to be an all-encompassing and pragmatic social as well as an individual concept. Motivations for veiling seemed to transform in meaning: sometimes it was related to religious identity, sometimes to a gendered political resistance. The interesting response was not so much their explicit answer for why they veiled or what the veil signified to them in a non-Muslim society, but rather how they understood the concept of veiling in Australia where they constitute a minority. The multiple layers of motivations for veiling impacted upon different aspects of their beliefs and behaviour. Further it is important to distinguish between what women say about their reasons for veiling and women’s understanding in general about what the veil communicates about woman’s identity to society as a whole.

Of all the fifteen women I spoke with only three knew which verses in the Koran mentions the head cover. Nevertheless all confirmed that the veil was compulsory in Islam. In the previous chapter I have discussed this politics of interpretation connected to religious texts, where various prominent Muslim writers and feminists have argued that veiling is not an injunction derived explicitly from the Koran (Roald 2004). (However the majority of Muslim scholars and Islamic feminists strictly emphasize veiling). Both Mernissi and Barlas argue that veiling

is not compulsory in Islam. Both refer to the lack of effort or interest among women to probe religious 'truth' from the scripts and warn women against agreement with conventional religious knowledge. On the other hand within the feminist debate those who argue against the veil are seen as being equally selective in their interpretations of the verses in the Koran (Roald 2004).

In my opinion, and although it is important to argue over who is right in the interpretation of texts, it is simply interesting to observe how many women take the religious knowledge they receive without probing or examining it. However in this context it is more important to understand and respect the women's choice for veiling on their own premises.

4.5 The veil as a form of protest or political resistance

Veiling as a form of protest or resistance was present in the women statements. The awareness of the political climate regarding the west and Islam and the conflict between certain Western countries and Muslim countries was certainly a present factor among some of the women. For some of these women veiling was used as a symbol to make a public statement to support the Muslim world. In this way multiculturalism is put on trial as generalisations are created between us and them where the former represents liberal democratic values and the latter backwardness and inequality.

Most of my informants felt a strong solidarity towards the Muslim world and what they experience as an unfair political climate that seems to be emerging in the West. For them it seems that the West had an agenda through which a structural demonizing attitude towards all aspect of Islam. One of the women said:

As we live in a society where we feel that Islam is attacked whether by Americans in the Middle East or in our society Australia ... and as Muslims are depicted as alien with a radical ideology unwilling to integrate or assimilate... and women in this context are used in this battle field, we saw what happened in France where they banned the veil. For me veiling is a political stand as well where I show that I am united with Islam and Muslims.

This woman explicitly links veiling to politics however all women felt that veiling could be understood as a political marker publicly since certain Islamic movements has taken its use as a resistance, however most women seemed to think that it is was not political but more as an identity. One of the women said:

Veiling is not political for a woman until she affiliates with an Islamic political movement, however in the media veiling its too often been linked as political as a result of the Iranian revolution and the Muslim brothers movement in Egypt, this does not mean that all veiled women are leading some kind of political conscious resistance against the West.

It is interesting that veiling can be connected to so many identities, and that few of my informants explicitly connected veiling to political action. Yet in the heated debate regarding the hijab in the West however there is a tendency to connect veiling with politics. Hege Storhaug a Norwegian feminist and human rights activist explicitly draws a parallel between the use of the headscarf and fanaticism, anti-democracy, and deprivation of freedom. (Aftenposten, 2007, 13 October”) For her the hijab is a political statement that is a public reminder of oppression and extremism.

Amongst my informants veiling was far from extremism or an experience of oppression but rather a public statement and as some women confirmed explicitly, wearing the veil is like bearing the flag of Islam, an identity they wished to preserve. Sana said:

When I started wearing the veil, I felt that I made a statement publicly. I am a Muslim and for me its part of doing *dawa*, which means to inform people about Islam.

Other women said that by veiling Muslim women confirm their religious identity, an identity which conflicts with the mainstream Australian culture, but through the persistence of ‘veiling’ that identity will continue living. Thus Fatma said:

When a woman makes the hard decision to veil in a society that is reluctant to understand Muslims on their own terms, she also “fights” the dominant idea that assumes veiling is oppressive, because she is the living proof.

Similarly Aisha said:

In the beginning I could feel that they were not at ease with me because of the veil, but after they got to know me as a person the veil faded away from their mind, it is the person inside that shapes people’s perceptions about you...if you are a good person and competent professional they start to see you as ‘normal’, and they respect you once they see that your Islam reflects positively on your behaviour.

From my findings I sensed that the women had a strong wish to preserve an identity that lacked credibility within Australia. It seemed that holding to ones belief served as a counterforce, as many of the women said that bearing a collective identity also gives them a sense of solidarity and strength to one’s religion and to the Muslim community.

4.6 Conclusion

Australian women who choose to veil are actively challenging the mainstream debate about veiling as a social phenomenon. The Islamic veil has become so over-symbolized that it is impossible to restrict it to one meaning. These professional women form a new ‘kind’ of Muslim identity that transgresses the context that they are part of. Also they are making a

visible public statement that confirms their affiliation to Islam. The women's motivations are indeed multilayered and complex, intersecting with a range of identities and social phenomenon. Veiling has a distinct pragmatic purpose in different aspects of the women's life. Whether imagined as serving as protection in public or constituting a sign of religiousness or a political stance, the women were actively aware that veiling is no simple ordinary garment in the world of the new order.

5. Conclusion

As the global debate about Islam and women continues to impact upon academia, media and the public it is important to give Muslim women themselves the chance to represent their complex identity. An Australian society based on multiculturalism needs to let Muslim women represent themselves on their own premises. This has been one aim in this research project. Through this research it is clear that Australian Muslim women are constructing and negotiating an active role in public space. Muslim women practice and understand Islam in different ways. Yet interestingly, their veiled identity does not seem to conflict with success in the workplace. Nevertheless, aware of the media's negative projection of Islam, veiled women seems to feel that co-workers shared biased ideas about veiling.

However it was equally striking to discover that as working Australian Muslim woman engage with non-Muslims, new ideas are formed and spread among the public about Muslim women. The woman's experiences at the workplace can best be described as professional and diverse. Muslim women also organized their work practices differently: some who had the available space prayed but those who did not did not perceive it as a problem. Despite this most women did not socialize much with co-workers as it seems that they felt uncomfortable in settings that they perceived as unsuitable for Muslims.

The discourse, experience and practice of veiled women are inevitably connected to the Islamic scriptures and their interpretations. Of all the women I interviewed very few knew which verses in the Quran mentioned veiling. As the thesis shows many writers that do specialize in this field argue that it is crucial that women probe religious knowledge in order to break with patriarchal interpretations. The role of women in Islam is not prescribed explicitly in the script, but is always interpreted by scholars. Further culture and socio-

economic background are influential in determining Muslim women's position. In Australia women's practices are related to how religious leaders construct knowledge about women in Islam. Yet Muslim women in Australia also seem to be very eager to change the subjugation that conservatives seek to maintain. Muslim feminist writers and activists are also seeking change as they use the scriptures to defend and better Muslim women's social status.

As for the choice to veil, it was interesting to see how veiling intersected with different social and personal ideas. The motivation can be divided into four categories, religious fulfillment, cultural identity, women's understanding of sexuality and political resistance. As I talked to the different women it was obvious that no woman had only one motivation, but they were multiple and complex. For some women the veil was a sign to claim respect and be protected from male harassment; for others it represented Muslim identity or was a political medium to express a sense of solidarity with Islam in the political scene. Indeed Australian women who choose to veil are changing stereotypes about Muslim women and their seclusion from public space as they are living evidence that they are engaged and active professionals. The usage of the veil can be said to be constantly changing in its significance in a Western social context. The motivations for veiling can best be understood as complex and pragmatic in varying social contexts. However it is positive that the women believe change is occurring as Muslim women and non-Muslim Australians are interacting in public space, building bridges and sharing experiences that will help to better the relationship and communication between Muslims and non-Muslim Australians.

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