

▼ “Wearing a Head Scarf Is My Choice as a Muslim: Please Respect It,” by Mariam Rahmani, originally appeared in July 2005 in the Austin (Texas) American Statesman. During that summer, Rahmani, a rising high-school senior from Theodore Roosevelt High School in Kent, Ohio, was participating in the 2005 Telluride Association Summer Program at the University of Texas at Austin. (The Telluride Association sponsors several such programs for high school juniors annually at institutions around the country. The six-week programs, which focus on various topics, are seminars much like upper-division college courses.) As you read, consider how Rahmani’s proposal for dealing with differences of religion and culture in the public space anticipates and responds to potential counterarguments.

Wearing a Head Scarf Is My Choice as a Muslim: Please Respect It

MARIAM RAHMANI

This fall, French public school students will experience their second year under a law that bans the display of all religious symbols in schools. The law has aroused immense controversy because it forbids female Muslims to wear *hijab*—hence its nickname, “the veil law.”

hijab: the head covering worn by some Muslim women. It usually covers the hair and neck, but not the face. A woman’s wearing the *hijab* is generally taken by Muslims to signify modesty.

“the veil law”: a French law passed in March 2004 that outlaws the wearing of “conspicuous religious symbols” in public schools. Although the law named no specific articles of clothing or jewelry, it was understood as outlawing the *hijab* (or even headscarves), yarmulkes (worn by some Jewish boys), turbans (as worn by Sikh boys), and large crosses (as some

Christians might wear). “Discreet symbols of faith,” such as hands of Fatima (worn by some Muslims), Stars of David (a symbol of Judaism), and small crosses (associated with Christianity), were permitted. To understand the law, one must appreciate that the separation of church and state has been much stronger in France than in the

United States for quite some time. In general, the French assume that religion is a private matter and shouldn’t be part of the public arena. Those supporting the law contend that it ensures that schools will be places where ethnic or religious identities don’t become more important than the values all French people share.

In passing it, the French government argued that its public school system should be an open arena encouraging students to engage in independent thought. This is a worthy aim for any educational system. Here in the United States, we have generally kept religion out of public schools for similar reasons. The trouble is not the French law's goal, but rather the Western perception that the Islamic *hijab* can't exist in a system allowing free inquiry.

I will soon begin my senior year of high school in Kent, Ohio, and am spending my summer here in Austin. Seven years ago, I made a personal decision to begin wearing *hijab*. You might wonder why.

At the root of *hijab* is the philosophy that a woman should be regarded for her personality, mind and abilities rather than her physicality. Wearing *hijab* reminds me not to focus on the superficial and instead to channel my energies toward developing my character and intellect. To me, this encapsulates the spirit of independent thought.

Ironically, much of the Western world views the Islamic *hijab* as a symbol of male oppression. But every day in the West, we are inundated with images that reduce women to sex symbols. Why do people think that my choosing to act on my own will—and without the pressure of having to physically impress the opposite sex—is “oppressive”?

Are advertisements that use scantily clothed women merely to sell a product, or that present women as mindless individuals valued only for their beauty, really “liberating”?

Hijab enables a woman to maintain her dignity. It helps her demand respect as an equal of any man rather than as an object for his pleasure.

The negative association Westerners have of *hijab* is that weak or brain-washed Muslim girls are forced by their families to wear it. The French law supposedly will liberate these girls.

My experience shows the opposite: a number of Muslim girls with *hijab* have passed through Kent's school system as dedicated and involved students who have become a part of the school community's fabric. Most females who are found with *hijab* in the Western world are strong, independently minded women who consciously and voluntarily resolve to wear it because it makes sense to them. I suspect this is why some people have grown afraid: they are intimidated by the prospect of capable young women choosing to live lives different than their own.

The issue is not oppression of women. It is about the unwillingness of two ideologies to coexist in mutual respect and understanding. A female with *hijab* registers as an unknown in the common Western mind, and humans are naturally wary of the unknown. Legislation inspired by such fear only succeeds in ostracizing these women.



In December 2003, about 3,000 people attended a demonstration in Paris to protest a law forbidding Islamic veils in French schools.

Among the elements in Rahmani's article are definition arguments that explore the meanings of the *hijab* and gender oppression. See Chapter 9 for more on making definition arguments.

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It's pointless to debate whether young women with *hijab* have excluded themselves from society or vice versa. A barrier now separates the two, making impossible the very kind of open, cooperative intellectual understanding that the French law was meant to foster.

Mainstream societies have often rejected the customs and beliefs of immigrant communities. These communities then isolate themselves to preserve their customs. No one benefits.

In an increasingly interdependent world, we must tolerate one another even when our attitudes diverge. On the issue of *hijab* in the West, both parties must first agree to disagree. Muslim women with *hijab* are not asking Western women to do the same, and likewise, Western society should respect our decisions. Furthermore, people who are ignorant of the principles behind *hijab* should seek to inform themselves, and Muslims should be patient to provide answers.

As human beings, we must realize that we all share the same basic desires for happiness and meaning in our lives. No one should suffer discrimination because we choose different paths to achieve these common goals.

RESPOND •

1. What is Mariam Rahmani's argument? How does she define the meaning of wearing the *hijab* and justify it? How effectively does she anticipate and respond to potential counterarguments?
2. How does Rahmani call into question Western notions of "liberation" for women?
3. If women of any faith or no faith at all believe that they're regarded by men or society at large for their "physicality," should they have to take action, or should men or society change? Why? How?
4. Rahmani sets up a strong contrast between the West and Islam, yet she is, based on available evidence, a Muslim in and of the West. If we assume this statement is true, has Rahmani contradicted herself or weakened her argument? In other words, must there be a strong contrast between Islam and the West? Why or why not?
5. In paragraph 13, Rahmani contends that we must "agree to disagree." Do you agree with her position, or are there alternatives she hasn't mentioned? What might they be?
6. In the same paragraph, Rahmani issues a challenge both to those who "are ignorant of the principles behind *hijab*" and to Muslims. Whatever your background, do some research on the topic, seeking to

understand why some Muslim women wear the *hijab* and why others, including many who are very devout, choose not to. As you'll soon discover, differences are linked in complex ways to a woman's understanding of Islam and, especially for recent immigrants or their children or grandchildren, the country or region from which they've come. You'll easily be able to find information on this topic on the Web, but you may also want to try to interview several Muslim women to obtain their views on this complex topic. **Write a definitional essay** in which you seek to make explicit the principles that various women attend to in their decision to wear or not wear the *hijab* or to cover their hair in some other way. (For a discussion of definitional arguments, see Chapter 9.)