hijab

I tell my story not because it is unique, but because it is not.

—Malala Yousafzai

The first question I get asked when I meet people unfamiliar with the concept of *hijab* is, “Why do you wear that thing on your head?” It’s a simple question, but it is loaded with misconceptions and prejudices proliferated by those who judge a woman by the way she chooses to dress.

Every Muslim, man or woman, who wears the *hijab* and dresses modestly may answer this question differently. I know I wear *hijab* because the freedom that allows you to go uncovered is the same freedom that allows me to choose to cover.

Hijab may be defined in a variety of ways by Muslims living in different parts of the world, but put simply it refers to the principle of modesty that applies to both males and females. The most visible aspect of *hijab* is the head covering that many Muslim women wear. As a result, those who choose to cover their hair and dress modestly have become the most easily recognizable members of the Islamic faith and therefore are the targets of the most criticism. In this chapter, we have chosen to highlight the struggle and the beauty of what it means to wear *hijab* in the West. For many women living in a Muslim majority country, wearing *hijab* is likely the social norm. Although such an environment may pose its own set of obstacles—such as the stigma around Muslim women who choose not to wear *hijab*—these stories shed light on what it means to practice your religion in a place where your religious expressions are not necessarily welcome.

Yet, it is not the cloth that oppresses a woman, but rather the ignorant mind that judges her by what is on her head rather than what is in it. When political institutions seek to ban the *hijab*, I wonder if anyone realizes that the very people who claim to "liberate" Muslim women who have been "forced" to wear the *hijab* are the ones taking away women's freedom of choice.

Difference is good. Difference is inspiring. Difference is empowering. Difference is what makes each and every human being beautiful. Being human sometimes means fearing what you don't know or what you perceive as different. But *hijab* is not scary, nor is it a symbol of terrorism or religious extremism. *Hijab*, like any other way of dressing, is a form of expression. Whether it expresses a love for God, a dedication to one's faith, an extension of one's love for fashion, or a heart steeped in modesty, the *hijab* is beautiful, too.

The hard truth is that wearing the *hijab* is not easy. Regardless of faith, we all share insecurities, and Muslim women often step out into the world on a day when their confidence is low only to be judged by others for their appearance.

To any Muslim woman who has experienced this: Hold your head high. Remember your strength comes from within. Your bravery, ambition, determination, and perseverance stem from a much deeper place than your appearance. The following stories about *hijab* remind us that *hijab* isn't just about what you're wearing; it's about your way of life.

—Iman Mahoui

rowaida *26, New York, New York, USA*

To me, journalism is about finding my place in an industry that isn't so accepting of me. It's about starting conversations that we are uncomfortable having. Many journalists say they went into this field because they liked to write. I went into journalism because I like to talk—just ask my parents. Growing up, I was a curious child—I never stopped talking, whether it was about my day or something I had learned. I would talk to anyone who would listen, and listen to anyone who would talk. As I got older, I consumed all types of media, and I became frustrated with the narrative surrounding Muslims and minorities. I decided I had to do something about it.

Being the only *hijabi* in a major newsroom is both a challenge and a blessing. I realized the importance of my role when I had a heartbreaking incident on my way to work. I was was crossing a street in Manhattan one morning when a man screamed at me, asking if I was planning to blow anything up. I was in a shock for a moment. I asked him, "What did you say?" but he only nonsensically screamed some more as he walked away. I rushed to the sidewalk to process what had just happened. I was born and raised in America and I love it here! He took one look at me and my *hijab* and decided I was a terrorist, when in fact I—probably like him—was simply on my way to work.

There are so few Muslims in the field of journalism. The problem is glaring, and it puts a lot of pressure on Muslim journalists to serve as go-to guides to Islam, which can be an incredibly complicated position to be in. Your religion becomes your identifier. You might be a journalist who focuses on environmental issues, but your coworkers see you as a constant resource who can help inform their stories about Islam. Being Muslim will always find its way back to you. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but once you realize how visible you are, it takes some adjustment.

Another challenge is the relationship Muslim journalists have with the Muslim community. Because *hijabi* women are considered representative of Islam, there is a burden of expectation that we must be perfect all the time. Although this idea comes from a place of valuing us, there is both a sense of relief and a sense of anxiety attached to this assumption. The Muslim community is relieved that there is a Muslim person in media, but it is anxious about the ubiquitous, unfair coverage of Muslims across all media platforms. I find myself constantly on the receiving end of my community's relief and anxiety. There is pressure from them, as if I could fix the years of negative press overnight. The weight of this responsibility—of changing the narrative of Muslims, particularly Muslim women in *hijab*—feels like it's quite literally in my hands. Going to work every day with that in the back of my mind can be exhausting.

But I'm grateful for my experience and I wouldn't change a thing. Wearing *hijab* in this field has only motivated me to excel in all that I do. My work focuses on Islamophobia and the Muslim community here in the United States. Each of my identities—young, Arab, Muslim, woman—has only widened my lens as a journalist. I want to deliver the message that more minorities and Muslims are needed as journalists, especially at a time when the very Muslim identity has been politicized. A lot of my work involves making sure we are producing nuanced and complex stories about Muslims that reflect the richness of our community, not simply ones that constantly tie us to national security and foreign policy. It's a lot for one person, but it's a goal that is close to my heart.

Don't ever think you cannot be successful because of your faith. This is the furthest thing from the truth and yet Western society repeats this lie to the Muslim community, and sometimes we even hear it from our own family and friends. There are Muslim women in Islamic history who were fearless leaders and whose faith only propelled them further into success. Success and *hijab* are not contradictory; they are complementary. Your *hijab* is your own.

sara *23, Dallas, Texas, USA*

I have worn the *hijab* for ten years. With every year comes a new layer of understanding what *hijab* actually means. I can barely recognize myself in the girl I was before I made the choice to don the *hijab* permanently. However, one feeling has remained the same: *hijab* is extremely difficult, and every *hijabi* wrestles with it in her own way. I think about how ironic it is that while there are tyrants working to eradicate Islam completely, Muslims are bickering about how exactly one should wear the *hijab*—how terrible it is if one strand of hair shows, or what part of hell is reserved for a woman that doesn't wear the *hijab* at all. I also went to a *Khutbah* recently in which the speaker equated a Muslim woman taking off her *hijab* to someone earning interest off of money. My blood was boiling, and I left feeling exactly the opposite of how one is supposed to feel when departing the *masjid*.

I am sick and tired of hearing white-passing male scholars attempt to make women feel less Muslim if they don't wear the *hijab* or if they choose to take it off. Let's be very clear about something: I love my *hijab*. I don't plan to take it off, God willing. It has taught me discipline and modesty. It has taught me to represent myself in the best manner possible. But at the same time, I do not think that *hijab* is one of our five pillars of Islam. Not wearing the physical *hijab* does not take one outside the fold of Islam. There are acts of worship that explicitly define us as Muslims—things like prayer, the belief in one God, fasting, charity, and good character, among others. But unlike something unambiguous in the Quran/*Sunnah*, such as establishing prayer and fasting in Ramadan, *hijab* is a gray area and its practice has evolved drastically throughout the centuries and in different regions. Wearing the *hijab* itself is not one of the acts of worship that defines one as Muslim or not.

This is not to denounce the importance and symbolism of *hijab*. I just would like to put things in perspective and ask that we stop making *hijab* so black and white when it was never intended to be. The *hijab* is an issue that has been debated back and forth for centuries, and if it was as well-defined as praying or fasting, there would be no argument about it. It is appalling to see people publicly bash our Muslim women and how they choose to wear the *hijab*, or attempt to impose the *hijab* on them if they choose not to wear it.

I have my own opinions about the *hijab*, and they have changed radically over the years, but wearing it is an act between myself and my Lord. I will practice what I believe while supporting other Muslim women who choose to practice *hijab* how they believe. When people are working to divide and destroy us, we must join hands with our Muslim sisters and stop judging each other by the way we wear our *hijab*s. We must stop judging those who choose not to wear the *hijab*. This piece of cloth has sadly evolved to become a primary marker of one's faith, which is superficial and counterproductive to what the *hijab* actually represents. *Hijab* has come to mean something different to everyone. So if you don't wear a *hijab*, stop telling me how and when to wear mine.

adwaa *28, Chicago, Illinois, USA*

I didn't completely understand *hijab*, and I didn't think it was right to commit to it unless I really understood what it meant. I respected women who wore it and were able to succeed in different areas of their lives, but I didn't feel it was right for me. It still seemed too restrictive for me, and I didn't think it was something I could practice.

I grew up what I like to call "culturally Muslim," meaning I was taught to follow Islam by watching how the people around me did it. Some aspects of Islam were strongly enforced in my home, such as not eating pork, not drinking, and not dating. But there were other parts of Islam that were not emphasized as much. I wasn't highly encouraged to pray or attend prayers at the *masjid*, or to listen to lectures or seek knowledge about the Prophets. *Hijab* was another one of those things. Some women in my family wore it, but many others didn't. Most of the women who did wear *hijab* did it because other women around them did—it was a culturally acceptable thing to do.

There were times when I assumed that *hijabi*s thought they were better than me, that they looked down on me because of how I lived my life and because I didn't dress as modestly as they did. I was wrong, of course. But I didn't know better at the time.

About six months before I decided to wear *hijab*, our family was hit with a tragedy. I woke up one September morning and learned that my cousin, who was just thirty-one years old, was killed in a car accident. He had his whole life still ahead of him, but then he was gone. I thought, "That could be me." I spent the next few months doing a lot of soul searching. I wanted to figure out how to live my life better. I wanted to stop putting things off and do what makes me feel happy and fulfilled right now.

I went through a major spiritual rollercoaster during these months. It took a toll on me mentally, emotionally, and physically—at one point I was even in the hospital because of my

symptoms. But through it all I had faith that the situation wasn't breaking me down. Instead, it was removing things from my mind and heart that weren't serving me, and eventually Allah (*SWT*) would help build me back up again.

At the start of the new year, my best friend told me maybe things would get better with a fresh start. I decided to read the book *Reclaim Your Heart* by Yasmin Mogahed, and I realized that I had been approaching life all wrong. I learned that maybe I wasn't receiving the things I prayed for from Allah because I had not been living for Him in the first place. I only turned to Allah when I wanted more than what I was already given.

I finally understood at my core how misguided that was. I decided this would be the year I focused on my spirituality and my relationship with Allah. After almost twenty-eight years of not being thankful for everything I had been blessed with, I owed Him. I wanted to focus on what I could do to show Allah that I deserved forgiveness, mercy, and blessings. That is when I thought of *hijab*. During prayer one afternoon, it came to me that if I wanted to show Allah that I have forsaken the superficial things in life, I should wear *hijab*.

It was the part of my religion that would be the hardest to observe. I was very attached to my hair, dressing how I wanted to, and going to the beach.

If I wanted Allah to see I was sincere, I had to give all of that up. A few weeks went by, and I was finally at peace with my decision and with myself. Whether I lived just one more day or many more years, I would show Allah how grateful I was for all of my blessings by doing the one thing that would be the hardest for me to do. It's still a struggle every day. My faith is not always consistent. It has highs and lows. Some days I feel like I'm not doing enough, and other days I wonder if putting on *hijab* was the right decision. But I remind myself that every act of faith, big or small, will always be a source of struggle.

I work with and interact with mostly non-Muslims, so I worried that I would find myself in difficult or scary situations because of my *hijab*, like other women have experienced. But on the first day I wore *hijab* to work, everyone was so excited about it. My boss at the time told me how proud of me she was, and that she had so much respect for my decision.

shabnam *38, Manchester, England*

I come from a Pashtun background in Afghanistan. As little girls, at the age of six, my friends and I would wear the *hijab* loosely on our heads as a sign of modesty. When I turned twenty I decided to wear it fully and completely cover my hair. I feel safer wearing the *hijab*. I think this is partially because I am doing what God has asked me to do, and I feel protected by His great power.

But *hijab* also causes others to judge. Some people find it extreme. In Manchester, where I live, it has never been an issue. Manchester is a diverse community, and it is very accepting of different cultures. Sometimes my white friends try on my *hijab*. We all understand that it is the person, not the *hijab*, that matters in any friendship. This is how it should be, but it's getting harder. Now it almost seems normal for Muslim women to be attacked once or twice in their lives for wearing the *hijab*. Fellow Muslims are paranoid about it. At my job, I used to work in the back where no one could see me. When we moved to an open space where the customers could see the employees, I was asked not to wear the black *hijab* because I was told I "look like a terrorist." And this comment came from my managers who are Muslim! Muslims are so terrified for our safety that we are hurting each other. This especially affects young Muslim women who don't feel accepted, even in their own communities. I wouldn't stop someone on the street and tell them what to wear. Why do people think it's okay to tell Muslim women what to wear? Stand up for what you believe in. People will respect your beliefs once they see how respectful you are of them.

baraa *21, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada*

The headlines involving *hijab* seem endless. Last year, the modest swimwear often worn by Muslim women, known as the "burqini," was banned in the French Riviera. A few days after the ban went into effect a photo surfaced of a Muslim woman being forced to undress at the beach by French police officers. In my home country of Canada, a Muslim woman in *hijab* was racially targeted and attacked. The aggressor yelled: "I am a Nazi."

When I hear these stories, I sometimes wonder why I still wear *hijab*. Why do I endure the onslaught of hatred from strangers? Why do I suffer stares on public transportation from uncomfortable riders? Why do I risk my safety for the headscarf? My relationship with *hijab* has been extremely complicated, and not just for these reasons. Although its political symbolism in an ISIS-obsessed, post-9/11 world is undeniable, to me *hijab*'s complications lie in the personal dilemmas, hesitations, and insecurities it evokes.

When I first wore *hijab*, I did not associate any larger meaning with it. At the time, I did not understand the meaning of modesty, nor did I try to. To retroactively impose those beliefs on myself as a ten-year-old would be unfair. I wore *hijab* simply because it would have been weird not to. This is how I explain it to my non-Muslim friends—imagine growing up around women like your mom and your aunts, with uncovered hair, and then as a preteen suddenly announcing you want to wear the *hijab*. It would be absurd. For me, the reverse was true: Wearing *hijab* was just a natural thing to do in my community.

Perhaps it was the naïveté of an eleven-year-old, but when I first wore *hijab* I did not feel different from my close friends of other faiths. My school friends shared my innocence. They would look at my *hijab* and ask questions out of sincere curiosity. "What is it like?" "Why do you have to wear it?" When they found out that I didn't celebrate Christmas they replied, "Oh, you're Jehovah's Witness. That's cool." That's the thing about eleven-year-olds: They don't associate meaning with a piece of fabric on some girl's head.

The insecurities around wearing *hijab* appeared in my life later on. I started to feel alienation and discomfort in middle school. *Hijab* meant I was "the weird girl." I did not dress like the other girls. I did not look normal, but most importantly I did not feel normal. At the same time, *hijab* did not protect me from the turmoil of being a teenage girl. *Hijab* did not make me immune to having crushes on boys, making dumb mistakes, hating my body, or having mental health issues.

As I moved through life, the challenges grew. Sometimes I blame my *hijab* for my being excluded in social situations, for not getting a job, or for not feeling beautiful. I feel I have to work twice as hard to get half of what those who blend in have. On the worst of days, I am deeply afraid my *hijab* means I will be assaulted as a recognizably Muslim woman.

All these insecurities mean I must continuously question and reaffirm why I wear a *hijab*:

I wear *hijab* because I want to.

I wear *hijab* as a feminist, as a woman, as a Canadian.

I wear *hijab* to hold myself morally accountable.

I wear *hijab* for God.

Although these are the beliefs behind my choice to wear *hijab*, daily insecurities taint my experience. I cannot help but imagine that life would be easier without a piece of fabric around my head. So yes, I think about taking the *hijab* off. Even though it is a personal choice, I often have to justify it to strangers.

To wear *hijab* is not a simple or an easy choice. It is not an isolated act. Mix in the politics of fear, the War on Terror, and exclusive feminism, and many days wearing the *hijab* seems almost impossible. Sometimes I ask myself, why do I bother carrying the burden of *hijab*'s political and religious symbolism (quite literally) on my head? My relationship to the *hijab* is not stagnant. The very act of perpetual self-inquiry makes *hijab* meaningful to me. My *hijab* has given me the opportunity to be a part of something bigger than myself. The insecurities and hesitations *hijab* prompts push me to acknowledge I am a work in progress. I am imperfect but determined to be the best version of myself and to stand firmly in what I believe.

shamaas *27, St. Louis, Missouri, USA*

If one were to look up the meaning of *hijab*, one would find the following definition: "a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women." *Hijab* is literally defined as something that is exclusive to women. But I'm here to tell you that that is not the case.

If you look beyond this definition, you'll gain insight into *hijab*'s true significance. The word itself translates to "barrier" in classical Arabic. The idea of *hijab* is to be a barrier for a woman to shield her beauty from unwelcoming eyes. Why is it that only women have to shield their beauty from men? Why must a woman cover up while a man can do as he wishes?

But there is a *hijab* for men, too. It doesn't involve them covering their hair, but it does require them to cover themselves modestly like anyone else. Often our understanding of modesty has been limited to women, but our tradition teaches us modesty is for both men and women. This is apparent in the statement of the Prophet *(PBUH)* "Modesty is good in its entirety."

In Islam, a woman is told to cover her hair, while a man is told to cover his body. A man is not allowed to wear any clothes that are tight fitting, like muscle shirts and skinny jeans. A man's modest obligations are overlooked by Western society. It is thought that Islam gives complete freedom to a man. In actuality, Islam is a religion of balance. A man is also encouraged to wear a *kufi*, similar to the Jewish yarmulke. A man wears it on his head to show modesty and humility to his Lord.

In Islam modesty comes in many forms: a *hijab*, a *kufi*, a *thaub* (a long white garment), and an *abaya* (a black garment worn by women). It is not bound to any one item of clothing. To say that only the *hijab* captures the true sense of modesty or that it only applies to women is incorrect, because the *hijab* is a representation of something greater than any one article of clothing. It represents modesty and humility, which apply to all the adherents of Islam, whether

they are male or female. The next time someone says that *hijab* is something that objectifies women or creates a double standard because men don't have a *hijab*, we can tell them that a man must also wear *hijab*. It just takes a different form.

jana *24, Columbus, Ohio, USA*

I was twelve going on thirteen when I first wore the *hijab*, and there was little spirituality involved in making that decision. At the age of twelve I viewed religion like a video game, a series of hoops I needed to jump through in order to collect the most points. Collect enough points and get closer to fulfilling my obligations to God. Fulfill my obligations to God, and I would be spared His punishments. It was all very logical and methodical. But at the age of twelve, I was also weighing the inconvenience of *hijab* in my life. How would I alter my soccer uniform? Could I still spar during martial arts? And what on earth was I going to do with all my T-shirts? I was able to come to terms with those scenarios, and I have been wearing *hijab* for more than a decade now.

Hijab is the most overt representation of Islam. For this reason, it is also one of the most hotly contested manifestations of the faith. There are differences of opinion as to whether it is obligatory or not, all stemming from real experiences that cannot be discounted. Every woman who chooses to wear the *hijab* has a unique, valid, and personal reason for doing so. I can honestly say that my relationship with *hijab* has changed since I began wearing it. It feels like it is no longer solely an obligation; it is a duty. I have realized that despite all the changes in my life—graduating college, landing my first job, getting into law school, and finally passing the bar—my *hijab* has been constant.

I have, more often than not, been the only *hijabi* in a classroom, in a workplace, and on a stage. And with that increased visibility, rightfully or wrongfully, I have been entrusted with a duty of representation. It is often unfair, exhausting, even frustrating—but for every interaction, I ask myself, would I rather someone else be entrusted with this duty? Would I rather have my faith and my *hijab* spoken about by those who have not lived the experience, or would I rather exchange some discomfort for some space and representation? I have chosen to take up as

much space as I can. I have filled rooms with my *hijab*. And I have insisted on doing my part to reframe what a Muslim woman wearing *hijab* can do.

Hijab is this beautiful, complicated, multifaceted thing, and while I love it, I would still absolutely be who I am without it. And therein lies its beauty, because a garment does not fundamentally change an individual. An individual, however, can change the perception of a garment, and that is what a *hijabi* does every day.

ruma *28, Detroit, Michigan, USA*

Hijab is for me and my Lord. I didn't always know this. I learned it through tests, trials, and experiments. At a young age I was told I had to wear this scarf on my head, and if I didn't, it was shameful; that's all I knew. At the age of twelve, I began wearing it to school, where I would open up my locker, take it off, and leave it there. I didn't want to wear it. I liked my ponytails and curled hair. I didn't want to be different. This went on for a year or two. When I entered high school, I did the same thing. The school bell rang, and the *hijab* came off. As long as you wore *hijab* for show, it was all right. Four years later I started college, which had a major impact on who I was and who I would become. The beautiful people I met in class, at after school activities, and at religious events on campus changed my entire view on *hijab*.

I guess people are right when they say your surroundings are really important. I started attending Muslim Student Association (MSA) events. I decided I would wear the *hijab* "full-time" because I was a "part-time" *hijabi* for way too long. So instead of taking it off, I kept it on. Did I understand why? Not yet. I met a few girls through MSA and one of them did not wear the *hijab*. But when it came to her five daily prayers, she was right there in the corner of the library side by side with us, with her shawl in her purse, ready for each prayer. I respected this so much. It changed everything for me. Did I still struggle with *hijab*? Yes. Did I give it the respect it deserved? No. I played around, allowing myself to take it off here and there, walking down the street without it on. But with time, I became more comfortable wearing the *hijab*.

Fast-forward years later and *hijab* serves as a constant reminder to me to be humble and remain grounded. It allows me to feel respect for myself just as my respect for God was cultivated over time. My *hijab* is no longer for show, for the opposite gender, or for my family —it's for me. I can still listen to rap music, dress up, have opinions, and be educated with my *hijab* on. *Hijab* will never limit me. It has liberated me. My *hijab* is a reminder to me of the next world, and that's why I have it on.

hala *58, Huntington Beach, California, USA*

In 1979 my father made the decision to leave our home in Syria and move to the United States. The plan was that my father would come to California first, and then my mother and I along with all my siblings, would follow. Our travel itinerary included a layover in New York, then a connection in Chicago on American Airlines Flight 191 before finally arriving in California.

At the time, all immigrants had to first apply for a green card before traveling to their next destination. I had recently put on the *hijab* and loved it deeply. The immigration officers in New York asked me to remove my *hijab* for my green card photo, but I adamantly refused. They kept repeating that I would not be able to move or board my next flight until I took the photo. Eventually they even threatened to revoke my immigration status and send me back to Syria unless I removed my *hijab*. But I steadfastly refused, saying I would rather obey God and forget about my immigration. I loved the *hijab* that much.

By now my mother was impatient, having flown halfway across the globe and spending close to our entire life savings on these plane tickets. She didn't want us to miss our connecting flight out to California. She missed her husband, and was exhausted and terrified, so she pleaded with me to remove my *hijab*. But I continued to refuse. The officers called me into the back room and had my family members walk into the room to try to convince me to take my *hijab* off. I told them, "It does not matter who you call back here to speak to me, I will not take my *hijab* off my head for this photo."

The officers called their supervisors, and three long hours of interrogation later, they finally released me and allowed me to keep my *hijab* on for the photo. By then it was too late; we had missed our connecting flight. I felt terrible because we didn't have a lot of money left, and we were worried we'd have to purchase new plane tickets and stay overnight in New York. However, the airlines eventually gave us tickets on a later flight that was direct to California. Furious, my mother lectured me the entire trip.

When we finally arrived at LAX, my father greeted us all with the biggest hug. He was crying uncontrollably. He kept repeating to us, "Thank God you're alive! Thank God you're alive!" We were confused. Why wouldn't we be alive? Finally he told us, "Flight number one ninety one, the original flight you were supposed to get on, crashed. All two hundred seventy-one people on board died instantly." We were all in shock. *Hijab* saved my family's life.