

The veil, feminism and Muslim women: a debate



1-3 pm, Thursday 14 December 2006
Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House

Topic

How do we ensure that the women's rights agenda reflects the needs of Muslim women?

Panel

Madeleine Bunting, Associate Editor, The Guardian (Chair)
Joan Smith, Columnist, The Independent (in absentia)
Salma Yaqoob, Local Councillor, Birmingham City Council
Maleiha Malik, Lecturer, King's College
Baroness Falkner of Margravine, Liberal Democrat Peer (first response from the table)

Participants

Fauzia Ahmad, Research Fellow, Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship
Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari, Secretary-General, Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)
Caroline Coon, Feminist Artist
Jo Ecclestone, The Indigo Trust
Urme Khan, Commissioning Editor, The Guardian
Right Honourable Dr Denis MacShane
Jasmine Lail, Parliamentary Assistant to Baroness Uddin
Anni Marjoram, Mayor's Advisor – Women's Issues
Farah Mihar, Media Officer, Minority Rights Group International
Heidi Mirza, Professor of Equalities Studies, Institute of Education
zohra moosa, Policy Officer, Fawcett Society
Katherine Rake, Director, Fawcett Society
Ala'a Shehabi, Abrar House
Sarah Sheriff, Muslim Women's Helpline
Baroness Uddin, Labour Peer
Jenny Watson, Chair, Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC)

Notes

The Fawcett Society does not have an organisational view on the veil. Fawcett hosted this roundtable to provide a forum for a deeply critical and honest engagement with the apparent tensions between 'feminism' and 'Muslim women' in Britain.

This report summarises the main discussion points of the veil debate. It complements the formal presentations made by the speakers, available on the Fawcett website:

www.fawcettsociety.org.uk

Key themes

There were five key themes in the discussion: power and discourses, choice, secularism, the veil as a sign or symbol, and feminism. Participants also proposed a series of nine concrete policy recommendations on how to meet the needs of Muslim women.

A) *Power and discourses*

Part of the discussion on the veil revolved around how it is debated in society. It was argued that we need to be more aware of the ways that political context, power imbalances, grassroots experiences and tone influence dominant discourses on the veil.

- **Political context:** Muslim women are serving as the battle ground for virtually every national debate, including secularism, religion, terrorism and multiculturalism, because of British foreign policy. Muslim women have been in Britain for decades without eliciting so much commentary. It was suggested that the purpose of these pseudo-debates about multiculturalism, integration and the veil is to displace discussion about the invasion of Iraq.
- **Power imbalances:** The debate on the veil reflects power imbalances in society. It is important to look at who the main figures are within the discussions, whose voices are being heard, and whose agendas are being enforced. Muslims do not have a lot of power in Britain. Muslim women have even less power, and also do not have power within Muslim communities. The debate was largely conducted between powerful white men. Muslim women's voices are not being heard: the debate has become about them, rather than between them or by them. The debate on the veil is disempowering Muslim women.
- **Grassroots experiences:** Grassroots experiences and responses are not reflected in the media or commentary on the veil. The debate on the veil has been going on between Muslims for years. It was only when somebody from outside the community commented that it became a media flash point because of existing power imbalances.
- **Tone:** Some debate on the veil is warranted, however allowing the discussion to be polarised is not helpful. The tone taken in criticising women wearing the veil during the debate was highly problematic. It is important to interact with people as different, to acknowledge different points of view and perspectives.

B) *Choice*

Another part of the discussion on the wearing of the veil centred on women's agency and the nature of choice. Generally there were three views expressed in the discussion.

1. Free choice: Women have the right to choose what to wear, including choosing to wear the veil. The idea of the veil as 'oppressive' gives no credence to an individual woman's autonomy. Just as coercion, whether physical, mental or emotional, is wrong, taking away a woman's choice on what she can wear undermines her dignity. Defending this choice will require different responses depending on the context – Iran is different to Britain. Women should be allowed the dignity of a plurality of choices in how to dress.

Responses to this view included:

- Women's choices to wear the veil do not affect them in isolation, but act as signs that have meaning to others around them.
- Choice may need to be limited in the interests of security, including national security. This is the only time when the state should be permitted to have an interventionist role in this area of personal choice.

2. Oppression of women: The veil is oppressive to women, and women choosing to wear it are oppressed. The wearing of the niqab is a recent phenomenon in Britain that has emerged over the last 3 or 4 years and is inherently oppressive of women. The veil allows only conditional access to public space. One of the ideals and achievements of western democracies is that men and women are afforded equal access to this space. The veil also makes women responsible for policing male lust. This stems from a paranoid view of male-female relationships. Finally, the veil creates hierarchies between women, separating the pious from the immodest. For all these reasons, the veil is offensive.

Responses to this view included:

- Autonomy of the body and the freedom of choice to control it are two of the most important ideas within feminism. We therefore do not have any business being 'offended' by another woman's choice to wear the veil.
- Women have been wearing the niqab in Britain since the 1980s – it is not a recent phenomenon. Before, women wearing the full veil did not attempt to enter education or the workplace as they equated the niqab with segregation. Today, women are attempting to reconcile the niqab with social interaction in the public space.

3. Constrained choices: Autonomy, individual agency, and individual choice are at the heart of feminist theory, but choices are exercised within contexts. There is a tension between individual choice and the constraints within which they are exercised. Women's autonomy and agency is a central tenet of feminism; removing individual choice by any means would remove the branch on which all feminists sit. However, women can make choices that do them harm. Raising female political consciousness is therefore vital. But we should not attribute 'false consciousness' to women who make controversial choices. This plays to patronising stereotypes of 'backwards' traditional women who need to be 'enlightened'. It ignores the Muslim women who are active in the public sphere, reconciling religion and their public lives.

Responses to this view included:

- Veils can be liberating. Some nuns used to wear the Catholic 'veil' as a way of moving away from the only roles open to them as working class Irish women: wife and mother. By taking the veil, the nuns were able to access education opportunities.
- Women make choices within faith. Faith is relevant and important to women. The veil is how some women choose to explore and express their faith, but the voices of women who choose to wear the niqab are not heard. Society marginalises expressions of choice through faith. As a result, the veil debate has only served to increase Muslim women's fears about their place in society.
- Some women do not have choice. They are coerced into wearing or not wearing the veil. Social pressures are also strong for women who choose not to wear the veil or hijab. Debate around the veil in some contexts can make it harder for some women to exercise the right not to veil whilst also being members of their religious community. There is hostility within the Muslim community towards women who choose to bare their heads. Women who do not wear hijab are sometimes challenged when they try to speak on behalf of Muslims or Muslim women. It is this type of intense pressure that silences moderate Muslim voices.

C) *Secularism*

Part of the discussion about the veil focused on the degree to which religious expression should be allowed in the public sphere in Britain. In some ways, the veil was treated as shorthand for debates about secularism. Secularism was defended, challenged, defined and redefined by attendees.

- **The challenge to secularism:** Britain is a secular society. It has been well served by secularism for many years. Western Europe is currently witnessing a challenge to secularism, with a push for religion to play a central role in public life. The Muslim veil serves as the most visible symbol of this desecularisation movement in Britain. The veil is a deliberate political provocation, representing a challenge to British secularism. In this case, those who oppose the veil are entitled to make a political statement back. This objection to the veil does not include a call for it to be banned.
- **Contradictory view of Muslim women:** It is contradictory to assert that the veil is both provocative and oppressive. The argument that Muslim women are both victims oppressed by Muslim men while simultaneously being threats because they challenge secularism is contradictory. It betrays the speaker's already formed opinion on the veil.
- **Reconciling religion and democracy:** The idea of religion and western liberal democracy being impossible to reconcile isn't new. Similar debates occurred about Jewish immigrants in England in the 1890s. At the time, Jewish people were deemed "irredeemably incompatible" with British institutions. Reconciling religious faith with public life and democracy is a current challenge for Muslims. Muslims need to systematically analyse why Islam, though it contains the resources within itself to do so, has consistently failed to achieve this reconciliation.
- **Defining secularism:**
 - There is a difference between *secularisation* and *secular societies*. In the latter, religion is allowed in the public sphere.
 - Secularism is a political system in which all religions can flourish equally.
- **Secularism is relative:** Secularism in Britain is different to secularism in other countries. Secularism is different in western and eastern democracies. Western secularism denies religion altogether in the public sphere. Eastern secularism acknowledges the importance of religion and encourages people to learn about different religions. In Sri Lanka, there is a secular constitution but a lot of religion in the public sphere.
- **Britain is not constitutionally secular:** The UK is not secular in its constitution. The Queen is 'defender of the faith' and head of the Church of England. Church of England leaders have a special place in our upper chamber. Rather, Britain has a secular culture.
- **Religion is complicated:** The discussion on secularism is not nuanced enough. The idea that secularism is good and religiosity is bad is too simplistic. The resistance to seeing religion or religiosity as a positive or empowering force for women in the discussion is a problem.

D) Signs and symbols

Another theme within the discussion was on the symbolic function of the veil. Within this, there was much emphasis on the western, non-Muslim majority context of Britain. Attendees made the following arguments.

- **Cultural context:** Our reaction to six men entering the room dressed all in black and wearing balaclavas would be different to six women wearing the veil. There is understanding about what the veil means to Muslim women and the resistance to the veil is not solely about fear in the way it would be for the masked men. However, the issue of trust is an important one. So much of western communication is based on trust between strangers, and the visuals of the face are vital for this.
- **Sign of oppression:** A woman's decision to wear the veil does not affect her in isolation. Wearing the veil is a sign that has deep meaning to others. The veil signifies the zenith of inequality; there is no theological reason for covering a woman's face. Signs have power and meaning: the swastika is recognisable and deeply offensive to all. The veil is no different.
- **Multicultural Britain:** Some signs have many different meanings, especially in a multicultural Britain. There is a healthy space for differences of opinion on the veil in a diverse Britain. The idea that the veil signifies inequality and oppression of women is a personal prejudice. It is not helpful to take that personal prejudice and project that meaning on to others and then take a position on the veil from that. The swastika is different because it is understood by everyone to be a symbol of fascism in the world. Its meaning is not contested in the same way that the veil's is.

E) Feminism

The role of feminists within the debate on the veil was widely discussed with no clear 'feminist position' emerging. Broadly, the comments grouped into three categories. The role of white feminists was also discussed in detail.

1. Solidarity: Feminists should stand in solidarity with women who choose to wear the veil. The veil debate is divisive, pandering to stereotypes about Muslims and Muslim women. Muslim women should have the freedom to choose how they want to dress. Where Muslim women might have expected solidarity from feminists around freedom of choice, they are instead feeling unsupported and attacked.

Responses to this view included:

- Muslim women have been at the receiving end of attacks on the street since the start of the debates on the veil. We need to acknowledge the link between high level rhetoric and such attacks on Muslim women on the ground.
- The examples of men attacking Muslim women because they wear the veil are simply other instances of men attacking women. The focus on women's clothing (whether burka or mini-skirt) is just an excuse men use.
- There is a role for Muslim women to define themselves in a more inclusive way and defend the rights of those Muslim women, both domestically and internationally, who do not want to wear the veil.

2. Anti-oppression: The veil is oppressive to women and feminists should take a stand against it. The veil signifies the oppression of women and is therefore deeply offensive to feminists. In many cases, women are forced into wearing it. This denies women their human rights.

Responses to this view included:

- The idea of being 'offended' by a woman's choice to wear the veil is wrong. Feminists have no business being offended by other people's choices because autonomy of the body and freedom of choice are two of the most important ideas within feminism. The 'tone' of being offended is inappropriate.
- The focus on personal offence distorts the debate. Speaking about one's own offence at a woman's choice creates unnecessary barriers between women. It is also dehumanising and denies a woman's individual agency.

3. False divide: The approach of some white feminists, or majority feminists, has been a disservice to non-Muslim women. These feminists suggest that there is a feminist utopia against which minority women's issues are now a challenge. They portray feminism as if it has already been achieved. In doing this, white feminists ignore all the work that still must be done in white western contexts to achieve equality.

The role of white feminists

The role of white feminists in the veil debate was criticised by some and defended by others. There were also suggestions for how white feminists could support Muslim women.

- **Criticism:** Feelings of rage, shame and disappointment at the position that many white feminists have taken on the veil issue were expressed. It is hypocritical of white feminists to say that they are against domestic violence and violence against women and not acknowledge the fallout of the veil debate on Muslim women. In one Muslim women's group in south London, every single member has experienced abuse in public since Jack Straw's comments. Their veils have been ripped from them and they have been spat at. Jack Straw's intervention has given people 'permission' from the highest level to abuse Muslim women. The way the issues were portrayed in the media was unhelpful. The polarisation of perspectives, especially within the feminist debate, was worrying as well.
- **Defence:** The contributions and struggles of white feminists in Britain have benefited us and should not be forgotten or marginalised. White feminists secured the right to vote in Britain. Women in Britain should remember this. There are a variety of views within white feminism, with no single 'white feminist' view.
- **Supporting Muslim women:** Western feminists should resist dictating and prescribing to other women. Some Muslim women have become annoyed, feel isolated, and do not want to call themselves feminists because of this treatment. We should not shy away from the word feminism because of some people's associations with it. While accepting that some feminists and feminism in Britain may have been too exclusive in the past, it is important to change and learn. Women should stand in solidarity with each other. Feminism should be inclusive and diverse.

F) Policy development

A number of policy recommendations emerged from the discussions.

1. **Practical action:** Muslim women need to be engaged, practically, at the grassroots on concrete action. There have been too many consultations and there is too much 'table talk'. Muslim women need to see action and change now.
2. **Power and participation:** Muslim women need to have their hands on the levers of power, with representation at Westminster and at local levels. Currently there are no Muslim women MPs, and there are only two Muslim women in the House of Lords. Muslim women are also underrepresented on strategic partnerships and local councils.
3. **Labour market progression:** Muslim women need a return on their investments in education. Research consistently shows that ethnic minority women are ambitious, and invest in their future. However, the future they experience is one of consistent knock backs, and a sense of having to compromise their identity in order to progress in the labour market. The lack of senior role models for ethnic minority women in business is a problem as it discourages young women from entering or pursuing certain positions. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has conducted research into this and will be publishing their results and recommendations in three months' time.
4. **Evidence-based:** Policy discussions should be rooted in empirical evidence. The debates cannot remain purely theoretical. Muslim women's concerns have been eclipsed in mainstream feminism because it has tended to take a theoretical, academic approach. If western feminists dictate or proscribe to other women, they will isolate them.
5. **Gender versus race or faith:** There must be a clear focus on gender in any policy agenda because gender is a more useful analytic tool than either race or faith. Understanding issues through a gender lens helps Muslim women more. The current focus on religion and race has marginalised Muslim women, and eclipses the power of women and girls.
6. **State policy:** Religion and 'culture' must stop being blamed for failures of the state to deliver to Muslim women. As research by Ericka Burman has shown for domestic violence, state policy makes the biggest difference in producing change.
7. **Muslim men:** Muslim men must be involved, and must help drive the women's equality agenda. The marginalisation of Muslim women is a problem of Muslim men and they must therefore take a lead in addressing it.
8. **National public organisations:** State organisations must show leadership. They must give thought to integrating women at all stages of policy. Muslim women must feel that the issues of public organisations are relevant to them, and must also feel that their issues are mainstream. Other national organisations, including Muslim ones like the Muslim Council of Britain, also have a role to play in prioritising Muslim women's issues.
9. **Secular versus religious:** We must resist attempts to force Muslim women to make a choice between secularism and faith. We must resist the attempt to use secularism to exclude Muslim women from the western intellectual tradition that they have always been, and are currently, a part of.