

Lifting the veil on gender apartheid

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France's Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin has just appointed a committee to draft a law to ban the Islamist hijab (headgear) in state-owned establishments, including schools and hospitals. The decision has drawn fire from the French "church" of Islam, an organization created by Raffarin's government last spring. Germany is facing its own hijab problem, with a number of Islamist organizations suing federal and state authorities for "religious discrimination" because of bans imposed on the controversial headgear. In the United States, several Muslim women are suing airport-security firms for having violated their First Amendment rights by asking them to take *off* their hijab during routine searches of passengers.

All these and other cases are based on the claim that the controversial headgear is an essential part of the Muslim faith and that attempts at banning it constitute an attack on Islam.

That claim is totally false. The headgear in question has nothing to do with Islam as a religion. It is not sanctioned anywhere in the Koran, the fundamental text of Islam, or the hadith (traditions) attributed to the Prophet.

This headgear was invented in the early 1970s by Mussa Sadr, an Iranian mullah who had won the leadership of the Lebanese Shiite community.

In an interview in 1975 in Beirut, Sadr told this writer that the hijab he had invented was inspired by the headgear of Lebanese Catholic nuns, itself inspired by that of Christian women in classical Western paintings. (A casual visit to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, or the Louvre in Paris, would reveal the original of the neo-Islamist hijab in numerous paintings depicting Virgin Mary and other female figures from the Old and New Testament.)

Sadr's idea was that, by wearing the headgear, Shiite women would be clearly marked out, and thus spared sexual harassment, and rape, by Yasser Arafat's Palestinian gunmen who at the time controlled southern Lebanon.

Sadr's neo-hijab made its first appearance in Iran in 1977 as a symbol of Islamist-Marxist opposition to the Shah's regime. When the mullahs seized power in Tehran in 1979, the number of women wearing the hijab exploded into tens of thousands.

In 1981, Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic, announced that "scientific research had shown that women's hair emitted rays that drove men insane." To protect the public, the new Islamist regime passed a law in 1982 making the hijab mandatory for females aged above six, regardless of religious faith. Violating the hijab code was made punishable by 100 lashes of the cane and six months imprisonment.

By the mid 1980s, a form of hijab never seen in Islam before the 1970s had become standard gear for millions of women all over the world, including Europe and America.

Some younger Muslim women, especially Western converts, were duped into believing that the neo-hijab was an essential part of the faith. (Katherine Bullock, a Canadian, so loved the idea of covering her hair that she converted to Islam while studying the hijab.)

The garb is designed to promote gender apartheid. It covers the woman's ears so that she does not hear things properly. Styled like a hood, it prevents the woman from having full vision of her surroundings. It also underlines the concept of woman as object, all wrapped up and marked out.

Muslim women, like women in all societies, had covered their head with a variety of gears over the centuries. These had such names as lachak, chador, rusari, rubandeh, chaqchur, maqne'a and picheh, among others.

All had tribal, ethnic and generally folkloric origins and were never associated with religion. (In Senegal, Muslim women wear a colourful headgear against the sun while working in the fields, but go topless.)

Muslim women could easily check the fraudulent nature of the neo-Islamist hijab by leafing through their family albums. They will not find the picture of a single female ancestor of theirs who wore the cursed headgear now marketed as an absolute "must" of Islam.

This fake Islamic hijab is nothing but a political prop, a weapon of visual terrorism. It is the symbol of a totalitarian ideology inspired more by Nazism and Communism than by Islam. It is as symbolic of Islam as the Mao uniform was of Chinese civilization.

It is used as a means of exerting pressure on Muslim women who do not wear it because they do not share the sick ideology behind it. It is a sign of support for extremists who wish to impose their creed, first on Muslims, and then on the world through psychological pressure, violence, terror and, ultimately, war.

The tragedy is that many of those who wear it are not aware of its implications. They do so because they have been brainwashed into believing that a woman cannot be a "good Muslim" without covering her head with the Sadr-designed hijab.

Even today, less than 1 % of Muslim women wear the hijab that has bewitched some Western liberals as a symbol of multicultural diversity. The hijab debate in Europe and the United States comes at a time when the controversial headgear is seriously questioned in Iran, the only country to impose it by law.

Last year, the Islamist regime authorized a number of colleges for girls in Tehran to allow students to discard the hijab while inside school buildings. The experiment was launched after a government study identified the hijab as the cause of "widespread depression and falling academic standards" and even suicide among teenage girls.

The Ministry of Education in Tehran has just announced that the experiment will be extended to other girls schools next month when the new academic year begins. Schools where the hijab was discarded have shown "real improvements" in academic standards reflected in a 30% rise in the number of students obtaining the highest grades.

Meanwhile, several female members of the Iranian Islamic Majlis (Parliament) are preparing a draft to raise the legal age for wearing the hijab from six to 12, thus sparing millions of children the trauma of having their heads covered.

Another sign that the Islamic Republic may be softening its position on hijab is a recent decision to allow the employees of state-owned companies outside Iran to discard the hijab. (The new rule has enabled hundreds of women, working for Iran-owned companies in Paris, London and other European capitals, for example, to go to work without the cursed hijab.)

The delicious irony of militant Islamists asking "Zionist-Crusader" courts in France, Germany and the United States to decide what is "Islamic" and what is not will not be missed. The judges and the juries who will be asked to decide the cases should know that they are dealing not with Islam, which is a religious faith, but with Islamism, which is a political doctrine.

The hijab-wearing militants have a right to promote their political ideology. But they have no right to speak in the name of Islam.

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