

Women's Rights and Expression through Clothing

Morocco and The United States

Ana Young

01/29/2019

As a brief introduction to my mid year comparison paper, I researched women's rights in Morocco and the United States. As that is a broad subject for a comparison project, I focused on clothing and women's expression through them. Further so I did a majority of my research on what it is like to wear a Hijab in the United States vs. Morocco.

In the US there is a huge range of conservatory standards. To generalize, U.S. standards are loose and less defined. Although there are specific standards when it comes to dress codes in school and expectations around a workplace. From what I've noticed in Morocco there is a sort of societal dress code, influenced by religion. In my view as a young American, most Moroccans dress more conservatively and composed on the daily. There are school dress codes, but they aren't usually enforced because they are rarely tested.

Traditional and Modern Clothing

Casual clothing in is either the same as in the U.S. with whatever is on trend, or a tradition Djellaba is worn. Djellabas take the same shape for both men and women, a long cloak with a pointed hood. For women they can be styled casually with simple

fabric. These are often worn over pajamas to leave the house. Nicer Djellabas are made of silk combination fabrics. Those can be worn out, or for when family is visiting. Next are Kaftans are a similar one piece dress down to the ankles, worn for traditional celebrations. The last level are Takchitas. These have two pieces, are embroidered and are worn for weddings. A bride will wear multiple of these on her wedding night. The more she wears the higher the class she is associated with. Some Moroccan women now even wear the traditional white dress as we do in the states.

Hijab, Niqab, Burqa

Hijabs are most common and preferred for Morocco's modern Islam. A Hijab is a simply wrapped scarf, leaving the whole face exposed. Hijabs are not included in Military or Police uniforms. Military uniforms, in comparison to the U.S. are standardized. Making everyone dress the similarly, internationally.

A Niqab covers the nose and mouth, leaving only a slit for the eyes. These aren't as commonly seen in Morocco and are only worn by traditionally religious women. Similarly uncommon veils are the Bushiyya and Al-amira. The Bushiyya is a sheer black cover for the face. I've only seen this maybe once or twice in Morocco. My host mom is the only person who I've noticed wear an Al-amira. It is a simple veil with a hole cut out for her face. She slips it on easily for when she Prays.

Burqas are the most covering veil, leaving only a grate for the eyes. Burqas are rarely found in Morocco. That being due to the ban in 2017. The upfront reasoning being for security and the prevention of terrorism. The Burqa easily hides identity. Along with

the Niqab, they have been used in acts of crime. Although “beyond immediate security concerns, the real worry for the moderate Moroccan government is the spread of radical, Salafist Islam” (Ennaji) Most Moroccans are against the Burqa for its association with radical Islam. There have also been cases where they hide abuse.

First Interview

I interviewed Omayma Achour for my first interview. She is an advocate for women's rights in Morocco. I started out asking her about what women in Morocco wear in the workplace. Her answers were similar to that in the U.S. Nice pants or dress, No leggings or jeans. Women have the freedom to wear a hijab in the workplace, just as they choose in life. She doesn't wear the Hijab because she believes there are more important pillars determining if someone is a good person. Her work in public service is what makes her a good person.

This did lead me to question why most women that I've seen in sales don't wear hijabs. I met a woman on the tram, who had just come from an interview. She was applying to work sales at a perfume shop. She was frustrated and shocked that she got turned down so quickly. She is easily qualified with a english degree. She summarized that she was turned down for her appearance. She wore a hijab, had braces and is married. She said they were looking for someone younger and not married, because of the appeal. She was appalled and expressed her other frustrations with current issues in Moroccan employment.

So what does the hijab say about someone? Are there stereotypes around a hijab? In the US the assumption is that you're muslim. A girl at my school tested this with an experiment at an art show. She had a picture of herself wearing a Hijab and posted it on the wall, next to a box where you could put anonymous comments. She posed the question "What are your honest thoughts when you first see me?" and received a variety of responses. The slips denoted things like "girl" "pretty" "Muslim" "terrorist", the last being the adverse response of a few Americans.

Two views on Hijabs; Yassmin vs. Nadyia

Wearing a hijab outside of countries with significant Muslim populations has become a symbol. Especially in the U.S., wearing one can be a statement of pride for their religion. "Women I respect and like wear hijabs and jilbabs to articulate their faith and identity. Others do so to follow their dreams, to go into higher education or jobs. And an increasing number are making a political statement." -(*Alibhai-Brown*) This quote comes from an opposing article, stating that the veil is a "rejection of progressive values"-(*Alibhai-Brown*). They can see in some cases how a hijab is a positive and empowering item of clothing. Although they mainly write how it as a symbol of oppression.

There are "simplistic assumptions of Muslims who think that a veiled woman is a holier woman" (Takolia). This author wrote an opinion piece; on how deciding to wear a hijab has liberated them. Their motivations are political rather than religious. They see that in our current society women are constantly associated with sex. By covering up,

she feels as if she is taking control of how people see her. She wants to be known for her mind and believes that others, even non-muslim women can do this too.

Second Interview

For my second interview, I talked with my language partner Rajae. She experienced the opposite of Takolia in her struggles of taking the hijab off. She started wearing it as most girls do, around puberty. It wasn't really her choice as an impressionable young girl. Most everyone else around her wore one, she hadn't thought otherwise. It wasn't until she met a teacher at Amideast, who made a lasting impression on her. He didn't question or judge her reasoning for wearing the Hijab. He rather exposed her to the world she hadn't thought about. She started thinking for herself and questioning her personal reasoning for wearing a Hijab.

Further into my discussion with Rajae, we got into stereotypes around Hijabs. The basic stereotype being; "good girls wear Hijabs" or "a girl who wears a Hijab is fit for marriage". This goes back to the "holier woman" assumption on girls who choose to wear the Hijab. She talked about how some of her friends started wearing the Hijab when they wanted to get married. Others will start wearing it because they're in a serious relationship and their boyfriend/fiance has asked them to. This, in not only my opinion, asserts a sort of claim to a girl and can be oppressing.

Wearing a Hijab in the United States

In the U.S. Muslims are a minority. Choosing to wear the Hijab can be a symbol of pride and identification with their religion. It also can be a symbol for representation

in politics. Women choose to wear them to advance their careers. However after 9/11 a lot of women found the opposite in service fields. Evidently due to their appearance. “I did an interview by phone for an office-cleaning job. I got the job. I arrived and asked what I should do. The next day my supervisor talked to me about that thing I was wearing on my head. I corrected her and told her it’s called hijab. I told her it was my religion; I had to wear it. The supervisor told me that some people feel uncomfortable to ask me about it. I wanted to talk to a higher supervisor. He never talked to me and they never addressed my issue. Then my supervisor followed me around and started harassing me. After a week I quit. It’s not worth it.” (anonymous participant) This person experienced discrimination in their workplace. They also quote the lack knowledge in the U.S. around other religions and cultures, in that their employer didn’t know what a Hijab was.

Throughout my culture studies here, I’ve learned of multiple cultural dimensions. One study was done by Physiatriist Geert Hofstede, Comparing Individual vs. Collective societies. The United States is a generally individualistic society, whereas Morocco is seen as more collective. In relating this to my research topic, women in the U.S. may choose to where the Hijab to stand out individually. Representing diversity in the U.S. and identity. In Morocco, collectively their family may where the Hijab or as a community. Wearing the Hijab isn’t choice that makes you stand out individually.

Limitations

In researching this topic, I never formally interviewed someone who wears a Hijab. I have been involved in discussions around the topic, where people have said they wear it “for their religion”, or they simply just “prefer to dress more conservatively”. As an exchange student I am also limited by the people I know. I am just starting to build relationships, so it is safer to hold a neutral ground with new friendships. This made it difficult to question a topic that I am just starting to learn the cultural context to. I was also limited in not knowing anyone personally in the U.S. who wears a Hijab.

Works Cited

- Alibhai-Brown, Yasmin. "As a Muslim woman, I see the veil as a rejection of progressive values." *The Guardian*, 20 Mar. 2015, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/20/muslim-woman-veil-hijab. Accessed 24 Feb. 2019.
- . "As a Muslim woman, I see the veil as a rejection of progressive values." *The Guardian*, 20 Mar. 2015, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/20/muslim-woman-veil-hijab. Accessed 24 Feb. 2019.
- Difference between the hijab, niqab & burka*. Narrated by Ashely Csanady, National Post, 2018.
- Ennaji, Moha. "Why Morocco's burqa ban is more than just a security measure." *The Conversation*, 31 Jan. 2017,

theconversation.com/why-moroccos-burqa-ban-is-more-than-just-a-security-measure-721

20. Accessed 24 Feb. 2019.

---. "Why Morocco's burqa ban is more than just a security measure." *The Conversation*, 31 Jan. 2017,

theconversation.com/why-moroccos-burqa-ban-is-more-than-just-a-security-measure-721

20. Accessed 24 Feb. 2019.

Hofstede, Geert. *I, We and They*.

---. *I, We and They*.

Takolia, Nadiya. "The hijab has liberated me from society's expectations of women." *The*

Guardian, 28 May 2012,

www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/28/hijab-society-women-religious-political. Accessed 24 Feb. 2019.

---. "The hijab has liberated me from society's expectations of women." *The Guardian*, 28 May 2012,

www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/28/hijab-society-women-religious-political. Accessed 24 Feb. 2019.

Vashti Persad, Judy, and Salome Lukas. *"No Hijab Is Permitted Here."* Women Working With Immigrant Women, 2002.

---. *"No Hijab Is Permitted Here."* Women Working With Immigrant Women, 2002.