

Veiling in Islam: An Introduction

Fashioning Identities

Consider:

On the one hand:

- Three of the five most dangerous countries for women are Muslim majority – Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia
- There are at least 5,000 deaths a year associated with honor killings
- In Somalia, 98% of women experience female circumcision

And on the other:

- In nearly two thirds of Middle Eastern countries, there are more women than men in the university system
- The three most populous Muslim majority nations have all elected female heads of state – Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh
- Some Muslim majority nations granted women the right to vote earlier than it was granted to women in the United States

What do these facts tell us?

There is no ONE universal experience of being a Muslim woman.
Similarly, there is no ONE experience of wearing the veil.

What happens if we type "Muslim
Women" into a Google image
search?

Pretty homogenous, right?

Do you notice how similar the women featured in this search look?

This tells us something very important about what non-Muslims expect to see when they imagine “Muslim Women.”

In reality, Muslim women who veil – many don’t! – often look like this...



Saudi Arabia



Pakistan



Afghanistan



Turkey



Egypt



Iraq



Iran



Morocco



Indonesia



Palestine



Somalia



Lebanon



Algeria



Popular Veiling Styles

Many Muslim women veil – both in parts of the world where Muslims are the majority as well as in places where they are the minority. But not all Muslim women veil. Some experience pressure to veil for a number of reasons while some freely chose to wear the headscarf. The “Hijab” style is the most popular worldwide. Women on the Arabian Peninsula tend to wear the “Niqab.” The “Burka” is mostly worn in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan while women in Iran often wear a “Chador.” Ultimately a number of factors and motivations are involved when a woman wears the veil.

So where did the tradition come from?

Consider the following:

- Veiling was a common practical practice with nearly all women in Arabia during the sixth century
- Veiling is NOT mandated in the Qur'an – it comes from a Hadith
- At first, only Muhammad's wives veiled

So what happened?

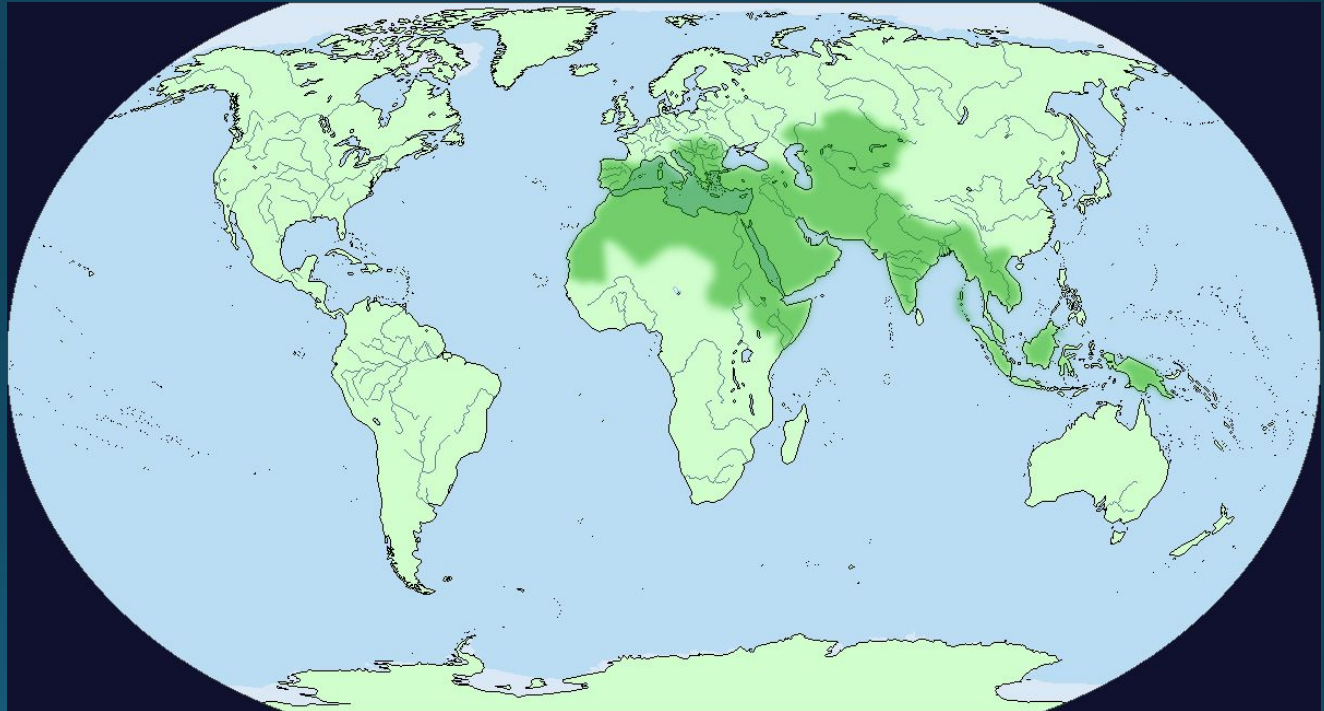
Why did veiling become an "Islamic" tradition?

Islam spreads...

And encounters veiling traditions in Persia – what we call Iran today. In Persia, veiling is a status symbol, visibly distinguishing high born women. Women of lower birth, in fact, were punished if they wore a veil.

Veiling becomes popular with both Arab Muslim women and remained popular with Persian women who had converted to Islam. The practice of veiling becomes linked to Islam, though different styles became popular in different geographic regions.

This explains why the general practice of veiling remains popular today but why it looks different depending on geographic location.



So why do women veil today?

Motivations include:

- Religious conviction
- Political affiliation
- Local custom
- Community pressure
- Convenience

And because it has become increasingly...



FASHIONABLE



What does Islamic fashion look like?

Increasingly, veiled Muslim women in Turkey are approaching veiling as a fashionable expression of self identity. Designers, producers, and marketing firms are picking up on this trend and increasingly marketing veiling as fashionable. This is creating new iterations of veiling and transforming Muslim women's experiences with veiling in interesting ways.

Now that you have a little background...

Complete the readings and activities for this module then join us in the discussion thread to share your thoughts and reactions.