

*“Unveiling The Truth Behind A Life In Niqab”*

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CAIRO: There are many names for it depending where you are in the world, but the objective is the same. Whether you call it niqab, burqa, purdah, abaya or whatever, the face veil – to those who believe in it – represents the ultimate act of superficial modesty as written in the Qur’an.

My interest first began when I was politely asked to leave an upscale Cairo restaurant because I was accompanied by a friend of mine - a young, educated, elegant, outgoing journalist – who happens to wear higab (head scarf). In a country where the majority of women cover their hair out of religious or cultural obligation, it struck me as absurd that any place would abide by such a restriction. The reason, they told us, was that her presence may irritate the other patrons. After a heated debate, they let us stay, but moved us to a dark corner. If women wearing higab experience such inequality, I wondered, than how can anyone do anything wearing niqab?

I tried it. I purchased a niqab from a Cairo department store and wore it. I was afraid. I worried that I would be discovered – that people would interpret my actions as a mockery, not research. The experience, however, revealed to me a new Cairo – where taxis snub you; men harass you, think the worst of you; people call you the most offensive names; and waiters refuse to serve you.

As the Arab world struggles to maintain its authenticity amid the overpowering reaches of globalization, how can anyone sustain this unwavering commitment to their faith when they are treated unequally even in their own country?

“People call us ninjas. They always say to us ‘what beautiful eyes you have,’” tells Sarah El-Meshad, 24, a graduate of the American University in Cairo (AUC) who wears niqab. “The hard part was dealing with acquaintances. They treat you like crap even though they know who you are and they’ve known you for a long time.”

El-Meshad and friends, Ebada Mostafa and Rola Sameh sat with me to discuss a range of subjects, from freedom of choice, to religious obligation, employment and education. The three were educated in American schools and are university graduates. Their parents are professionals. None of their mothers wear niqab. The three believe niqab, according to the Qur’an, is a sun’na, or “extra credit,” as they called it, as opposed to practices that are fard, or obligatory.

As we talked, waiters stared and pointed – probably because it struck them as unusual that a western-dressed woman with no veil would sit chatting in English with three women in niqab. Sameh would eventually call them out on their stares.

“Is there a problem?” she said firmly but politely. The waiters scattered. She laughed and continued. “Sometimes I feel that a girl who wears the niqab is at war –war with her family, war with her friends,” she says. “People refuse you, they mock you. We are religious people who chose this extra something we want to do for our religion and it’s nobody’s business.”

Historians argue, the desert-dwelling Bedouins covered their faces as a social practice long before the advent of Islam. Even European noblewomen were often depicted shielded their faces as an act of humility, particularly when mingling with lower classes. The practice of covering the face first grew popular in the Muslim world through the teachings of the Wahabbi and Salafi sects of the Arab Gulf. Viewed by those people as the ultimate act of modesty, niqab is viewed as a woman’s obligation as written in the Qur’an, equal to its teachings that men are obligated to “lower their gaze.”

“Before, whenever I saw Sandra Bullock or Britney Spears wearing a certain style, I’d run out and buy the exact same style,” recalls Mostafa, 23, a bubbly graduate of communications from the school of Modern Science and Arts (MSA). “It occurred to me after a while that all we are doing is copying foreigners. Well, what’s the problem is I copy my ancestors? I am imitating the Prophet’s wife.”

All three women confess their burning desire to work. They acknowledge, however, that they have made a major sacrifice for this religious commitment since no jobs in Egypt are willing to hire niqab women. It is not illegal for niqab women to work, however, most employers, particularly those in the private sector, confess openly that a woman covering her face exudes an uninviting air – and that is bad for business.

“I haven’t seen a case of a professional covering her face seeking employment in the private sector,” says Sherif Samy, chairman of Skill-Link, an internet-based job search and career advice provider. “You would find them in some government offices because usually government offices attract a lower caliber of professionals, less ambitious than those who work in private sector. As for those who don’t choose to hire, it’s very personal. It’s never written, and people have the right. I can’t blame them for it.”

“I am dying to work of course but only if they genuinely respected our ideas and our abilities,” says Mostafa. “But they think we can’t talk and we are introverted. Many people don’t even want to give us a chance because of what we wear.”

“The issue is non-verbal expression,” explains Mushira El-Bardai, executive director for Human Resources at AUC. “Non-verbal communication is important too. I can’t communicate with you non-verbally if I can’t see your face. That’s in the workplace or classroom.”

Education, particularly at liberal, private institutions such as AUC has been a subject of on-going debate as many believe a ruling banning niqab women from taking classes stifles religious freedoms. In 2001, the university issued a formal prohibition on students wearing niqab. Administrators cited a 1994 decree issued by then-Minister of Education Hussein Kamal Bahaaeddin banning the face-veil in schools, saying the matter violates security standards set by the institution. Dozens of schoolgirls have been suspended since the decree was issued, though in most cases, the courts overrule the decision and permit the girls to return to class.

Sameh was in her last year at Cairo University when, as she describes, she showed up one day suddenly dressed in niqab.

“They freaked out,” she recalls, laughing. “I was the only person in niqab in all four grades. No one knew how to handle it.”

“People have this very negative image of women in niqab - that they are low class and uneducated,” adds El-Meshad. “One of the reasons why I wore it was the people take a better idea of the niqab. To me it was like, I am educated, I know how to talk, I am social, and I wear niqab. I make it a point to go and talk to people for that reason.”

Above all other preconceptions regarding niqab women, these young women – all of whom are married, two of them, already mothers – want to make one thing clear to the outside world. Their decision to wear niqab, they say, was in no way influenced by any man in their life, be it their husbands or fathers.

“I use to sit with my husband, before we got married, without the niqab,” admits Sameh. “Some people yell at me and say ‘no, that’s not right, you are niqab.’ It’s none of their business. I am free to do whatever I want. It’s my right, and the right of the man I was going to marry that we get use to each other and he gets to know me without the niqab.”

“When I wore the niqab, I had been engaged for 6 months,” recalls El-Meshad. “My parents were afraid that my husband influenced me. But it wasn’t like that at all. The first thing I did before I wore it is I asked my mom and dad. My mom said, ‘I can’t tell you not to do something that is good for you.’ My dad actually got me my first niqab. So, you see, I chose this.”