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THE PRACTICE OF HEADSCARF AMONG VEILED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES: WHY THEY WEAR THE HEADSCARF? AND WHAT DOES THE HEADSCARF MEAN TO THEM?*

AMERİKA BİRLEŞİK DEVLETLERİ'NDE BAŞÖRTÜLÜ ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN BAŞÖRTÜSÜ TECRÜBELERİ: NEDEN BAŞÖRTÜSÜ TAKIYORLAR? BAŞÖRTÜSÜ ONLAR İÇİN NE İFADE EDİYOR?

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Etik Beyan / Ethical Statement:

Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur / It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.

Bu araştırma için Houston Üniversitesi **İnsan Denekleri Koruma Kurulu/ Committee for the protection of human subjects** tarafından, 01/12/2011 tarihinde, etik uygunluk belgesi verilmiştir. Belge, çalışmanın sonunda mevcuttur.

For this research, a certificate of ethical compliance was issued by the Committee for the protection of human subjects of the University of Houston on 01/12/2011. The document is available at the end of the study.

Abstract

The headscarf, as a visible symbol of Islam, has aroused a great deal of scholarly investigation and debate about the meaning of the headscarf and veiled women's experiences. However, there have been few studies related to the headscarf and Muslim women on university campuses in the United States. This study focuses on veiled Muslim female students from different nationalities attending the University of Houston. The study examines the main reasons related to the students' decision for wearing the headscarf and the effect cultural background has on this decision and their experiences. The interview data of 28 veiled Muslim students of different nationalities indicated that although religious belief contributed as a main factor in the decision to wear the headscarf, for many participants' cultural background and social environment played significant roles in both their decision and conceptualization of wearing the headscarf.

Keywords: Headscarf, Hijab, Muslim University Students, Muslim women, Veiling, Islam

Öz

İslam dininin görünür bir sembolü olarak başörtüsü konusu gerek örtünün Müslüman kadınlar için anlamı gerekse de başörtülü kadınların tecrübeleri açısından pek çok akademik araştırma ve tartışmanın konusu olmuştur. Konuyla ilgili birçok araştırma yapılmış olmasına rağmen, özellikle Amerikan üniversitelerinde başörtülü kadınlar ve başörtüsü tecrübeleri ile ilgili oldukça az sayıda araştırma bulunmaktadır. Araştırmamız Amerika'da Houston Üniversitesi'nde okuyan farklı milletlere mensup başörtülü kadınlar üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Çalışmamız burada okuyan Müslüman kız öğrencilerin başlarını örtmelerindeki temel sebepler ve sahip oldukları kültürel arka planın bu kararları ve başörtüsü tecrübeleri üzerindeki etkisini araştırmaktadır. 28 başörtülü Müslüman öğrenci ile yapılan yüz yüze görüşmeler ortaya koymuştur ki her ne kadar dini inanç öğrencilerin başlarını örtme kararlarında temel faktör olsa da katılımcıların birçoğu için sahip oldukları kültürel geçmiş ve buldukları/geldikleri sosyal çevre hem kararlarında hem de başörtüsü takma algılarında önemli rol oynamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Başörtüsü, Üniversite, Müslüman Kadın, İslam, Amerika.

Extended Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to examine Muslim female university students' understanding of wearing the headscarf and to gain some insights into their experiences regarding wearing the headscarf both in the United States and in their country of origin. In the study, three main subjects are discussed: the reasons that college educated Muslim women choose to wear the hijab, the meaning of the headscarf for those women and how do students' cultural background affect their headscarf experiences as well as how to wear it.

The sample of the study included Muslim female students wearing the headscarf from all education levels who attend the University of Houston. In the study, participants were recruited through a combination of the "snowball technique" and "purposive sampling". Twenty-eight face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 undergraduate and 14 graduate students. Moreover, the participants are from ten different nationalities with the majority of Turkish students. Furthermore, a majority of the students come from predominantly Muslim nations, and one comes from the Philippines.

Regarding the reasons behind these women's decision to wear the headscarf, the interviews revealed five basic reasons: religious obligation, encouragement of family and friends, environmental effects, and reaction to discrimination. During the interviews, the majority of participants stated that their main reason for wearing the headscarf is religious belief. They emphasize that they observe a religious mandate and wearing the headscarf is their own decision depending on the verses in the Qur'an and other religious readings. In addition, religious training in the family also influences their decision to wear the headscarf, framing it as a religious obligation. Furthermore, the interview data revealed that students from societies, like Tunisia and Kyrgyzstan, where wearing the headscarf is prohibited or not considered appropriate for young women, specifically emphasize religious aspect of the veiling and express how religion and their religious beliefs encourage them to continue wearing the headscarf. For these students wearing the headscarf is not an easy thing to do and they find enough encouragement to continue wearing it in religion.

In addition to religious obligation, nine students expressed that their families, friends and schools also positively affected their decision to wear the headscarf. Also, some students stated that when they started to wear the headscarf, they felt that then they became the part of the group of their female family members and their friends. Here, it is important to state that the participants did not perceive the family and friends' influence or engagements as pressure, it was mostly attributed as 'role models. Meanwhile, families' attitudes towards the headscarf differ. Some students express that their family members were reluctant to support their decision to wearing the headscarf and they advised them to wait until the end of their university years. On the other hand, another group of students explained their families' opposition over the headscarf. Main reason for the families' opposition was their concern for their daughters' security and bad reputation of Muslims in their society, especially after 9/11 attacks. As a visible symbol of Islam, headscarf might make their daughters open target especially in a non-Muslim society. So, it is suitable to say that the main idea behind their negative attitudes towards the headscarf could be to protect their daughter.

In addition to religion, environmental effects also had an impact on Muslim students' decision to start wearing the headscarf. The interview data show that students' neighborhood and the schools which they have attended also had an impact on their decision. During the interviews, seven students expressed that they went to religious high schools and that education and environment in these schools affected their decisions to wear the headscarf. Furthermore, some students stated that they started wearing the headscarf to protest against the ongoing prejudices toward Muslims in the United State.

Regarding the meaning of wearing the headscarf, Muslim students wearing the headscarf invest it with a range of meanings. More than half of the participants foregrounded the religious meaning of the headscarf and underscored that wearing the headscarf means religious obligation or religiosity for them. In addition, 'responsibility' and 'modesty' are also other main themes mentioned by the students as meanings they associate with the headscarf. Some Muslim students stated that they became more conscious of their behavior after they wear the headscarf because they felt that they

represent Islam and Muslims in their society. Therefore, according to them veiled Muslim women should more pay attention to their actions in public to represent Islam in a good way. Furthermore, all the interviewees agreed that the headscarf identifies the wearer as a Muslim, so, according to them, it is a sign showing their Muslim identity and sending religious message, not sending a political or cultural message. Meanwhile, all veiled Muslim students agree that it would not be correct to think that a Muslim woman wearing the headscarf is more religious than those who do not wear the headscarf. Wearing the headscarf is not the only sign showing the level of religiosity. Moreover, the interview data of the veiled Muslim university students from different nationalities reveal that there is an impact of cultural backgrounds on the age at which they started wearing the headscarf and on their experiences of wearing it. Regarding the difference between the United States and their country of origin, in terms of being a veiled Muslim woman, students from the countries where the headscarf is a controversial issue, expressed the differences between other people's attitudes towards them in society. In addition, all interviewees underscored the value of freedom in the United States as the major difference.

INTRODUCTION

With the impact of growing Muslim population in Western countries, the issue of Islamic dress code for women, the headscarf in particular, as a visible symbol of Islam, has become among the hot topics debated in regard to Islam and Muslims. There has been much discussion and research regarding the wearing of headscarves in many other non-Muslim countries and even in the Muslim world itself.

Many of the studies focus on Muslim women's perceptions and cognitive meanings of covering more than on the actual practice.¹ This research in this respect aims to analyze the reasons that college educated Muslim women choose to wear the hijab, the meaning of wearing the headscarf for Muslim women, and the impact of cultural background on the decision to wear the headscarf based on stories from Muslim female university students in the United States.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many non-Muslims assume that women wear the headscarf because they are forced to do so by their communities, families, and especially their male relatives. In addition, Western feminists claim that the headscarf is a symbol of the subordination of Muslim women.² On the other hand, advocates see it as related to identity, religiosity, and in some cases, political statements.³ They state that there are social and cultural motivations for covering in addition to religious motivation.⁴

When we consider the reasons for wearing the headscarf, they differ from person-to-person. Women have various motives for wearing the headscarf.⁵ They may wear the headscarf because of their religious beliefs, their families' tradition/values, peer pressure or to obey the rules in their country, or they wear the headscarf for personal reasons. Every veiled Muslim woman may have her own reason to wear the headscarf. In this respect, wearing the headscarf shows sociological complexity. Bullock states that the sociological complexity of covering is not captured by explaining the issue as a symbol of women's oppression, as some researchers have done in the West.⁶ While some researchers see the headscarf as a symbol of women's supposed subordination in Islam,⁷ many researchers

¹ Inger Furseth, "The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiations Among Immigrant Muslim Women in the Los Angeles Area", *Review of Religious Research* 52/4 (2011), 365.

² Furseth, "The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiations", 365; Norma Claire Moruzzi, "A Problem with Headscarves: Contemporary Complexities of Political and Social Identity" *Political Theory* 22/4 (1994), 661.

³ Esmail Shakeri, "Muslim Women in Canada: Their Role and Status as Revealed in the Hijab Controversy", *Muslims on the Americanization path?*. ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad - John L. Esposito. (Oxford: Oxford University Press., 2000), 135-136.

⁴ Jen'an G. Read - John P. Bartkowski, "To Veil Or Not To Veil?: A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas" *Gender & Society* 14/3 (2000), 396, 403.

⁵ John P. Bartkowski - Jen'n'an Ghazal Read, "Veiled Submission: Gender, Power, and Identity Among Evangelical and Muslim Women in the United States", *Qualitative Sociology* 26/1 (2003), 88; Tabassum F. Ruby, "Listening to the Voices of Hijab", *Women's Studies International Forum* 29/1 (2006), 58-60; Rhys H. Williams - Gira Vashi, "Hijab and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves", *Sociology of Religion* 68/3 (2007), 284-85.

⁶ Katherine Bullock, *Islam Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003), 29.

⁷ See. Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in their Minds and on our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women", *Resources for Feminist Research* 22/3 (1992), 7-9.

consider the hijab an important issue regarding Muslim women's role in Islamic society.⁸ In addition, for others the hijab has acquired the status of 'cultural symbol'.⁹

1.1. Reasons for Wearing the Headscarf

There are some examining studies that have focused on reasons veiled women give for wearing the headscarf. These studies show that Muslim women's experiences of the hijab are not unitary.¹⁰ Their motivations and experiences for veiling can vary dramatically. In this context, the meaning of the headscarf also differs within (Muslim) society from person-to-person. In different societies people give different meanings to covering. Some women cover from custom, others wear the hijab because of the state law.¹¹ Meanwhile, Muslim women mostly state religious reasons as a major reason to wear the headscarf. They see covering and wearing the hijab as a sign of religious identity.¹²

Although many Muslim women state religious reasons as a main reason for their choice to wear the headscarf, research has been done exploring other reasons women decide to wear the headscarf and the meanings they invest in it. In some studies, the headscarf is considered as a political symbol of 'Islamism'.¹³ For this reason, the headscarf has potential multiple meanings¹⁴ which are difficult to understand at first glance. Gole argues that the practice of the headscarf is "the most salient emblem" of 'Islamism', which praises the "return to the origins, to the fundamentals to address a critique of Western modernity, on the one hand, and a desire to realize a systemic change, to create an Islamic society, on the other."¹⁵

1.2. Muslim Women in America

It is important to note that, when Muslim women immigrated to Western countries, they often felt tension and stress since they came between the two world wars. Many felt that integration to the western lifestyle would be easier if they stopped wearing the headscarf. The earliest Muslim immigrant women to the United States came from Lebanon and they were only wearing a loose scarf in the United States.¹⁶ In the 1950s and 1960s immigrant Arab women wore Western dress before they arrived in the United States.¹⁷ However, the Islamic revival of the '70s and '80s and its emphasis on covering influenced Muslim Americans.¹⁸ Therefore, the immigrants in this time period gave more importance to covering.

⁸ Leila Hessini, "Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morocco: Choice and Identity" *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East – Tradition, Identity, and Power*, ed. Fatma Muge Gocek - Shiva Balaghi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 47; Bullock, *Islam, Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*, 87-88.

⁹ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Quran, traditions, and interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127; Also see: Metin Toprak - Nasuh Uslu, "The Headscarf Controversy in Turkey" *Journal of Economic and Social Research* 11/1 (2009), 53.

¹⁰ Bullock, *Islam Rethinking Muslim Women and The Veil*, 86.

¹¹ Elizabeth W. Fernea, "The Veiled Revolution" *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Bowen, Donna L. - Evelyn A. Early (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 152-153.

¹² Read and Bartkowski, "To Veil or Not to Veil?", 402-403; Bullock, *Islam Rethinking Muslim Women and The Veil*, 105; Williams - Vashi, "Hijab and American Muslim Women", 285; Furseth, "The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiations", 372.

¹³ Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Mustafa Gurbuz - Gulsum Gurbuz-Kucuksari, "Between Sacred Codes and Secular Consumer Society: The Practice of Headscarf Adoption among American College Girls", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29/3 (2009), 387.

¹⁵ Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*, 1.

¹⁶ Furseth, "The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiations", 366.

¹⁷ Yvonne Y. Haddad - Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 123.

¹⁸ Furseth, "The Hijab: Boundary Work and Identity Negotiations", 366.

Since the mid-1990s, and especially since the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in 2001, the situation has changed in the United States.¹⁹ According to research, many veiled Muslim women faced discrimination since many people associated the headscarf with oppression and terrorism.²⁰ While many Muslim women took their headscarves off for fear of being attacked or viewed negatively, there also has been a growing emphasis on the headscarf among some Muslim American women.²¹

There have been many studies regarding Muslim women and the headscarf in the United States, conducted in different states and cities in the United States and focused on Muslim women's perceptions and cognitive meanings of covering. They show that American Muslim women state various motives for wearing the headscarf.²² For instance, in Los Angeles, many covered women believe that wearing the headscarf is mandatory and they want to maintain their Islamic identity.²³ Meanwhile, in a study conducted in Chicago, young American Muslims emphasized religious obligation as one reason for covering in addition to several interpersonal reasons, such as peer pressure, insulation from parental control as well as making a fashion statement.²⁴

As with other minority groups in the United States, Muslim immigrants have faced many difficulties and much discrimination. As a visible symbol of Islam, Muslim women wearing the headscarf face many difficulties and harassment even in the United States, where the freedom of religion and expression are important values. Also, they are more likely to face discrimination than those who do not wear the headscarf.²⁵ According to the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), harassment and discrimination against Muslims remains a serious problem in the United States.²⁶ Almost every year they report many cases of discrimination in which Muslim women's head-covering was recognized as the factor that triggered the incident.²⁷

2. METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this study is derived from 28 face-to-face semi structural interviews conducted with Muslim female students wearing the headscarf in the University of Houston. The University of Houston is a publicly-funded university and the second most racially/ethnically diverse university in the United States.²⁸ This demographic provided me an advantage to reach Muslim students from different nationalities.

In the study, as I aimed to assess the meaning of the headscarf for Muslim students and the experience of veiling in their social lives, I used face-to-face in-depth interviews, like

¹⁹ Read and Bartkowski, "To Veil or Not to Veil?", 396.

²⁰ Jasmin Zine, "Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of Veiling Among Muslim Girls in a Canadian Islamic School", *Equity & Excellence in Education* 39/3 (2006), 240-241; Yvonne Haddad vd., *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 39.

²¹ Yvonne Haddad, "The Post-9/11 Hijab as Icon", *Sociology of Religion* 68/3 (2007), 254.

²² Bartkowski, and Read, "Veiled Submission", 79-81; Read and Bartkowski "To Veil or Not To Veil?", 403-405; Williams - Vashi, *Hijab and American Muslim Women*, 281-284.

²³ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997), 110.

²⁴ Williams - Vashi, *Hijab and American Muslim Women*, 283-285.

²⁵ ACLU, "Discrimination Against Muslim Women, The Women's Right Project" (Accessed 1 September 2021).

²⁶ Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), "Civil Rights Report: The Struggle for Equality" (Accessed 1 September 2021).

²⁷ For CAIR reports see: <https://www.cair.com/resources/cair-civil-rights-reports/>

²⁸ University of Houston (UH), "Statistical Handbook" (Accessed 13 September 2021).

many other studies on veiling.²⁹ In the study, qualitative research method was used as it allows more exploration of feelings and reactions and avoids directing subjects to specific choices with predetermined responses.³⁰ Furthermore, in my study, I was interested not only in what the women's reasons are for wearing the headscarf, but also what kind of experiences they have had wearing it. In this context, qualitative interview method allowed me to have more information about those students' experiences.

In the research, participants were recruited through a combination of the "snowball technique" and "purposive sampling" and instead of their name pseudonyms were used to provide confidentiality. To reach data saturation for the themes and subthemes I conducted interviews with Muslim female graduate and undergraduate students from different disciplines and majors.

In the study, the number of undergraduate and graduate students were identical with 14 undergraduate and 14 graduate students. Among the 28 participants, Turkish students constitute the majority of the samples with 11 students. Of the remaining participants, five are Indian, four are Pakistani, two are Iranian and the rest is Kyrgyz (Kyrgyzstan), Tunisian, Syrian, Palestinian, Philippine and Somalian respectively. Furthermore, a majority of the students come from predominantly Muslim nations, and one comes from the Philippines.

At the time of the interviews, an average age of participants was 23, with a range of 18 years old to 30 years old. Six students were born and raised in the United States; 11 students have lived 5 or more years in the United States, while 11 students have come to the United States in the past 5 years for graduate education. Regarding the length of time each student has been wearing the headscarf, while the majority of the participants have been wearing the headscarf for more than six years (19 out of 28), three of them have been wearing the headscarf for less than a year.

3. FINDINGS

The interview data follow four main enquiries on Muslim students' attitudes towards wearing the headscarf: the reason behind their decision, the meaning of wearing the headscarf, the effect of cultural background on the decision to wear the headscarf, and the differences between the students' experiences in the United States and in their native country in terms of being a veiled Muslim woman.

3.1. Reasons for Wearing the Headscarf

In the study, the interviews revealed four basic reasons for wearing the headscarf: religious obligation, encouragement of family and friends, environmental effects, and reaction to discrimination.

3.1.1. Religious Obligation

The majority of participants stated that their main reason for wearing the headscarf is religious belief. When questions on why or what made them wear a headscarf asked, of the total 28 interviewees, fifteen participants cited religious beliefs and religious imagery as the primary reason.

²⁹ See. Read and Bartkowski, "To Veil or Not to Veil?", 402; Caitlin Killian, "The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair" *Gender and Society* 17/4 (2003), 573; Gurbuz - Gurbuz-Kucuksari, "Between Sacred Codes and Secular Consumer Society", 388.

³⁰ Brandon Hunt, "Publishing Qualitative Research in Counseling Journals", *Journal of Counseling and Development* 89/3 (2011), 296.

They mainly emphasize the verse(s) in the Qur'an about the headscarf and their interpretation. For instance, Warda, 18-year-old Indian undergraduate student, explains her primary reason as follows:

It was my own decision. I did it based on my personal interpretation of what is written in the Quran. I read in the Quran that it wasn't a choice for me. It was 'this is what women should do.' After reading that verse, I felt very passionately about wearing it.

Similarly, Nour, Tunisian graduate student who started wearing the headscarf five years ago, emphasizes that wearing the headscarf is her own decision and she feels that in doing so she is following a religious mandate. In addition, Elmira, 27-year-old Syrian graduate student, relates, "I thought it was time for me. I mean, it was time for me to start covering, out of modesty . . . just because I feel like it is a statement in the Quran."

In addition to the students' own interpretation of the Quran and other religious readings, religious training in the family also influences their decision to wear the headscarf, framing it as a religious obligation. Meryem, Turkish undergraduate student who started wearing the headscarf at twelve years old in Turkey, says,

They (my parents) weren't forcing me to wear the headscarf. We were educated about Islam; you know the rules, you know what you are supposed to do or not... When I was around twelve, I recognized I was supposed to wear it because of my religion's duties... I had a lot of friends with the scarf. That (also) encouraged me . . . (But) mostly, I realize that it is time for me to start to fulfill that duty and started wearing the headscarf.

Furthermore, students from societies where wearing the headscarf is prohibited or not considered appropriate for young women express more religious reasons for veiling than students from countries where such prohibitions do not exist. For instance, in Tunisia there is a governmental ban on veiling, and in Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, there is a lot of social pressure against veiling. Therefore, the students from these countries state that the situation has been more difficult in their countries. They explain that their families never wanted them to wear the headscarf. In addition, their families and neighborhoods are strictly against, and reacted negatively to their decision to wear the headscarf. In this context, those students especially emphasized that they started wearing the headscarf because of their religious belief, not for any other reasons. Nour states, "It was my own decision, just for religious reasons." In addition, when asked the meaning of the headscarf, Kyrgyz graduate student Amina's reply shows how its religious meaning make her continue to wear the headscarf. She says,

Let me be honest. I am wearing the scarf only because it is a requirement for women, because of the religion and that is it. If it weren't a requirement I wouldn't do it. I don't see any kind of positive feelings. Because, it is really hard for me to wear the scarf. But I am wearing it only because God told us to wear. That is it.

Amina also states that since her parents and family are opposed to wearing the headscarf, she is not able to tell them that she started wearing it. Her husband's family is also against the headscarf. She says,

When I introduced my family with my husband's family. The first thing that they actually talked about is wearing the scarf, without any reason. My family started to tell 'oh, she is praying, since the guy is praying than the guy will easily ask her to wear a scarf. Tell your boy that he doesn't ask our girl wear the scarf'. My

husband's parents said 'oh, we don't want her wearing the headscarf either'.
Actually, my husband's parents are worse than my own parents.

Therefore, Amina says that she takes every precaution such as taking off the headscarf while she is with other Kyrgyz who are close to her family and not letting people post any photos of her on the university's website, so as to keep her family unaware of her headscarf.

It is suitable to state that because of the difficulties they face in their families and communities, wearing the headscarf is not an easy thing to do for these students. In religion they find enough encouragement to continue wearing it. Therefore, the students from these countries emphasize religious aspect of the veiling and express how religion and their religious beliefs encourage them to continue wearing the scarf despite all the difficulties they have faced more than the students who were raised in the United States, or other countries in which the headscarf is not prohibited. Their stories also show how religious beliefs and responsibilities can be more influential on their decisions than social rules or familial pressures.

In addition, while the majority of respondents gave religious reasons for veiling, at the same time they tended to be non-judgmental about unveiled Muslim women. In-depth interviews reveal that Muslim women wearing the headscarf are reluctant to judge their unveiled counterparts. Mainly, they interpret wearing the headscarf as their decision and they are respectful toward unveiled Muslim women. For instance, Zahra, Iranian graduate student, implies that as a result of different interpretations of the Quran and Islam, it is natural/expectable to see unveiled Muslim women. Similarly, all interviewees say that they can't judge unveiled women because it is their decision not to wear the headscarf. All also agree that wearing the headscarf is not the only sign of being religious. Women can still be devout and practicing Muslims without wearing the headscarf.

Likewise, Zeynep, Turkish graduate student who restarted wearing the headscarf in the United States, highlights that non-veiling women still can be practicing Muslims. She states,

I believe (that) they have their own reason for this. I don't judge them. I experienced the same thing. They can be practicing. I didn't give up practicing when I took my headscarf off. I believe that Muslim women should wear the scarf. It is one of the obligations in the religion. But if she doesn't, it is up to her.

Tisha, Indian undergraduate student who also covers her face, also states that being a practicing Muslim woman does not depend only on wearing the headscarf. Unveiled women might be more religious and know more about Islam than veiled women. Therefore, instead of judging her, people should attempt to learn the reasons behind her decision. Similarly, Warda says:

It is something between them and God; it is not something I can explain to you what they are going through or why not. I don't think anything at all... I don't have any judgments. The most important thing is wearing the scarf and acting accordingly. They can be modest in their dress and behaviors whether or not they wear the hijab.

On the other hand, Amina distinctively emphasizes that wearing the headscarf is not an easy decision to make. Therefore, she says that she doesn't judge unveiled Muslim women because of their decision. She says,

It [wearing the headscarf] is really hard decision. You are actually limiting yourself. In terms of religion, someone is following the religion more than the other one. This is a difference for them. I know it should be done and that is why I am doing it.

It is also important to note that while interviewees state that wearing the headscarf is a personal choice/decision that nobody can judge, they are also against forcing women to wear it. Hanan says:

I believe that it should be their personal choice, but at the same time I do believe that it is commanded for the Muslim women to wear it . . . The woman makes the constant choice to wear or not to wear it. That is between her and Allah. Yes, I believe that is obligatory but at the same time I don't believe that a woman should be forced to wear it. That should come from her, it is between her and God.

3.1.2. Encouragement of Family and Friends

In addition to religious obligation, during the interviews, nine students expressed that their families, friends and schools positively affected their decision to wear the headscarf. It is suitable to say that this effect is mainly related with the time when they decided to wear the headscarf. In the study, many students (15 out of 28) started wearing the headscarf when they were nine to thirteen years old, a time when family members have greater influence on their children. For instance, Hera, 18-year-old Pakistani undergraduate student, explains how her bigger sister and mother affected her decision to wear it:

My sister started wearing it before my mom did. My mom wasn't wearing the hijab (at that time). Then my mom started after my sister. She was like, "How can my daughter wear it and I am not wearing (it) myself." I want to do everything that my sister did and that is why I started wearing it originally. Even though I know that is Islamic . . . I didn't actually know the (exact) purpose behind wearing the hijab until I started to high school. Now, I know why I wear the headscarf.

Furthermore, the data indicate that for some participants wearing the headscarf is also considered as an important step in belonging to the group of their sisters/female family members and their friends. For instance, Tisha states how the importance of the headscarf in her family and neighborhood affected her decision to wear it:

When I was in India everyone there used to wear it as a part of class culture and religion too. All of my sisters... I have older sisters, (and) they used to wear it. And when I used to go outside, I didn't wear it, I just used to wear jeans without a headscarf. My sisters used to wear everything; they used to cover their face too with hijab and stuff. So, I just liked it and decided to wear it . . . I just started wearing it to get in the group . . . My parents were supportive and my friends were also supportive.

In addition, as discussed, even though students mainly emphasize the religious reasons the interview responses show that the effect of family members is more prevalent than religious reasoning in childhood. Zeynep explains this effect by saying that "It (wearing the headscarf) is like a tradition in my family. My mom and sisters are wearing the scarf, and in addition to my beliefs they want me to do (the same). We can say, for me, it is a family tradition plus religious belief."

It is important to state that friends and female family members' influence does not always come in the form of pressure. It is mostly attributed to their 'role models. This is mainly because those students had already known/learned that wearing the headscarf is a religious obligation, therefore they did not perceive the family and friends' influence or engagements as pressure. For instance, Yusra, 21-year-old Indian undergraduate student,

emphasizes that since she had already known religious aspect of the headscarf, she looked her family's and friend's influence as an example, not a pressure. She says,

My mom was wearing it and the people around me were wearing it. I went to a lot of lectures and attended a lot of conferences. One by one, all my friends around me started wearing it. It wasn't like pressure, because I agreed with it. Maybe it was a kind of a peer pressure.

Muslim students' interview narratives demonstrate that even though the majority (16 out of 28) of students had support from their families on their decision to wear the headscarf, for some students the decision to wear the headscarf was not as easy as they thought it would be because of their families' reaction. Five graduate students said that their family members are reluctant to support their decision to wearing the headscarf and advised them to wait until the end of their university years. They are not supportive because they think that this may affect their future in their country of origin. It is important to state that these attitudes are mainly among Turkish families and it shows how the headscarf ban in Turkish universities at the time when they decided to wear the headscarf affected the families' attitudes. Meanwhile even though those parents were not supportive for their daughters' decision they did not show any negative attitudes toward them.

On the other hand, some families were very rigid about the headscarf. Even though all of them were Muslim families, they were opposed and really against their daughter's decisions to wear the headscarf. During the interviews, five students explained the difficulties they faced in their family and among their friends because of their decision to wear it. For instance, Fatima, 24-year-old Palestinian student, who was born and raised in the United States, says:

When I decided to put it on, I went to trouble with my own family. My own family didn't accept me. So, I went through a very big struggle. My mother was very much against the hijab at that time. She didn't want to be seen with me in front of the people... I remember, I saw my mom in a mall when I started covering. I wanted to say hello and give her a hug and my mom rejected me, completely backed away from me. She didn't want to be seen at all in front of the people. That hurts... My father was the only one who supported me. He studied Islam and he understood me. My brothers and sisters, we are five kids; they did treat me different as well. I hated how I was always hearing negative comments. If there was a party or dinner for family they said "you are not going to come to that!"

Here, it is important to state that students from all nationalities experienced family opposition over the headscarf. However, the reasons for the families' opposition differ among the students, depending on where their family lives. Six of the students (21%) state that their families are totally against their decision to wear the headscarf. As the first group, families living in the United States were mostly against the headscarf because of the concern for their daughters' security and the bad reputation of Muslims after 9/11. For instance, Warda, who was born and raised in the United States, explains:

I was advised by my family not to wear it . . . It was shocking that my own family, who came from the same faith, would be so discouraging. Even if they didn't agree with the hijab, I thought they would at least respect my decision . . . They feared my safety because of the way that Islam is perceived today... From the immediate family, I am the only one who wear the scarf. My father discouraged me from wearing it, he was also curious about my security.

Negative attitudes towards Muslims in a post 9/11 society had impact not only on families but also Muslim students. For instance, Hera explains how she decided to take her headscarf off for a while after 9/11 because of the negative attitudes she faced and heard. She says,

Especially after 9/11, students in my school were asking ‘Are you a terrorist?’, ‘Is your dad Osama bin Laden?’... I was so stressful. I got really tired of everyone’s these saying. So, I took it off for a day. Then I felt really, really bad...

In addition, some of the students face really difficult times when they decide to wear the headscarf. Even though their families are Muslim, they are severely against their daughters’ decision. Especially because of the negative propaganda against Muslims, their family members and friends do not want to be around them. Varisha, Indian undergraduate student who decided to wear the headscarf after 9/11, explained the difficulties she faced in her own family after she made her decision to wear the headscarf. She says:

When I was eleven one morning I put on a scarf ... My mom came and said, ‘What are you doing?’ I said ‘I am going to wear the scarf today.’ She said, ‘No, you shouldn’t.’ She got very upset. She stopped speaking to me. She wasn’t wearing it at that time. In the school, my best friend was Muslim and she didn’t want to be around me. It was OK first time, and it was hurt but I kept persisting on it ... When my father saw me, my parents are divorced, he said, ‘I can’t go in public with you. You need to take this off.’ He was really upset. I stopped seeing him for six months. He didn’t want to see me ... I didn’t see him for really long time. Because he thought I had become an extremist Muslim ... But at that time, I just want to do everyone to know that I am a good person and I am a Muslim. What happened at 9/11 did happen because of the bad people.

Those narratives show how 9/11 attacks and the people’s perception toward Muslims in post 9/11 American society effect Muslim families. Headscarf as a visible symbol of Islam became a controversial subject among them. The above narratives show that main idea behind their negative attitudes towards the headscarf could be to protect their daughter.

3.1.3. Environmental Effects

The interview data show that students’ neighborhood and the schools which Muslim university students have attended also affected their decision to start wearing the headscarf. During the interviews, seven students expressed that they went to religious high schools and that the education and environment in these schools affected their decisions to wear the headscarf. For instance, Emine, 26-year-old Turkish student said, ‘I was going to religious school. So, it affected my decision. Everybody in there was wearing the headscarf and not wearing the headscarf was unusual.’

Conversely, Yusra, Indian undergraduate student, reveals that attending a religious school affected the time when she started to wear the headscarf in a negative way. She says:

My mom and the people around me were wearing it but at that time I was going to religious school and it was part of my uniform. But I wouldn’t wear it outside. I wore it from nine to five every day for school. My friends started wearing it before me and I didn’t feel that need as much as they did. I went to a lot of lectures and I attended a lot of conferences, so, I always knew it was like something I needed to do. I understood that I should be covering to please Allah... It just took me a while to get there (to know) I was ready, and finally I reached that stage.

On the other hand, for Iranian students the situation is quite different than with other students because of the situation in their native country. In Iran, all women have to wear the headscarf in public. Therefore, girls start wearing the headscarf early in their lives. In this context, both Iranian graduate students referred to the situation in Iran when they explained how they decided to wear the headscarf. For example, Zahra, who started wearing the headscarf when she was nine years old, says, “First time, it was my family’s decision. But after (that) I prefer to have it . . . In my country we have to have a scarf, so I didn’t have any other choice.”

Though wearing a headscarf is not optional for women in Iran because the law mandates it, the Iranian participants in my study still continue to don it even in the United States. In this regard, they emphasize that even though they started wearing the headscarf because of the law in their country, they continue to do so because of the religious obligation that they learned in schools and from family and friends. Iranian students say, “It is one of the things we have in the Quran... I can’t say everyone should do this. (But) I can say everyone who believes in Islam and knows it perfectly should do it.” (Zahra); “When I came here nobody forced (me) to wear the scarf but I like it and I wear it.” (Sara)

Moreover, the effect of school environment also had a major impact on some of the students’ decisions to wear a headscarf. Students studying in a co-education environment had a different story to tell than those who studied with girls only. For example, two Indian students, one an undergraduate student and the other a graduate student say that the environment of a co-education school forced them to accelerate their decision to wear the headscarf. Both felt themselves more comfortable in a co-education school with the headscarf than without it. For instance, Tisha asserts that she started wearing the headscarf only in the United States rather than in India; “Because in India I used to go to a girls’ school so it was OK if I did not cover it but here (I go to) a public school... There are guys and girls... I am comfortable wearing it.” Another Indian graduate student Yusra also emphasizes that she felt more comfortable with the headscarf in a co-education school. She says:

I was from a girls’ school. I never had interaction with guys, as students or classmates. In my 11th grade, I had to go to a co-educational school where boys and girls both study. I wasn’t very comfortable with exposing. So, I really want(ed) to be covered. If I wasn’t covered, I wasn’t confident. My mother was like, ‘Why do you want to wear it? You are so young’. But I need(ed) to wear it, or I would not go to the school.

These narratives indicate that for those students, the headscarf was a way of feeling comfortable in their relationship with male classmates. They prefer to set boundaries with their male friends and wearing the headscarf is the best way to do it.

3.1.4. Reaction to Discrimination

Although religious belief and family encouragements are the main reasons for wearing the headscarf among Muslim university students, some students mention the effect of social issues on their decision to wear the headscarf. For instance, Hanan, 18-year-old Pakistani undergraduate student, says that she started wearing the headscarf to protest against the ongoing prejudices toward Muslims in the United States. She uses the headscarf as a reaction to American stereotypes of Muslims. She says:

When 9/11 happened, I was very upset and in fifth grade. My school started to discuss how Muslims were terrorists and how we need to (go to) war with Islam. (The) media kept showing people who are wearing the headscarf and people wearing beards that these were Muslims who we need to fight. I had classmates

(who) didn't understand what was happening. My teachers were hitting Muslims. I was angry, and decided to put the scarf on to show them that I am a Muslim, I have known (them) for years and I am not a terrorist.

Considering the above responses to wearing the headscarf from the Muslim university students, it is accurate to say that that even though some of the students expressed different reasons, religious reasons continue to be a major turning point for them to start wearing the headscarf. The students also, in some way or another, consider wearing the headscarf to be a part of their religion and thus commanded by God.

3.2. The Meaning of Wearing the Headscarf

The interviews show that Muslim students wearing the headscarf invest it with a range of meanings. Regarding the meaning of wearing the headscarf, four main themes were identified: religious obligation, responsibility, modesty, and Muslim identity.

In the study, fifty-three percent of interviewees emphasized the religious meaning of the headscarf and underscored that wearing the headscarf means religious obligation or religiosity for them. For instance, Meryem said:

It is a religious obligation. I feel like my main duty is to be a good Muslim. How a Muslim woman can be a good Muslim? First, we need to pray five times a day, and a lot of things. Also, there is one more word it says you need to wear headscarf... it is not the headscarf... you need to cover yourself up... I try to cover myself up as much as I can do to be a good Muslim, to make Allah like me.

In addition, the university students also mention 'responsibility' (32%) and modesty (25%) as meanings they associate with the headscarf. Regarding responsibility, they think that they need to represent Islam and Muslims in a good way; therefore, they should pay attention to their actions in society as veiled Muslim women. For instance, Ayesha, 19-year-old Pakistani undergraduate student, explained how she felt after wearing the headscarf:

I became a symbol of Islam . . . I feel sense of responsibility . . . I noticed and realize that people are looking at my actions and that I have to present myself as a good person. I have to do it for God sake . . . Headscarf made me realize that I have a great responsibility.

Similarly, Fatima explained how she changed her behavior after wearing the headscarf to represent Muslims in a good way. She said:

(After wearing the headscarf) the way that I interacted with people changed. I tried to learn to stop talking so loudly. I have learned to stop getting angry. I was a hothead. If someone disrespects me, I would get upset. Once I started wearing hijab, it cooled me down a lot because you realize you need to watch your behavior, you have to watch your actions a lot more, because you are an example for other people out there. People see your behavior and see how you act. So, if you're wearing the scarf and people see you acting in a very bad way, you are not putting out a good message about Islam.

The above narratives reveal that Muslim female students became more conscious of their behavior in public after they wear the headscarf. This is mainly because as veiled Muslim women they feel more responsible in representing Islam (and) Muslims. This responsibility usually comes from the roles assigned by Muslim society to a veiled Muslim woman. According to many Muslims since these women have the visible symbol of Islam, they are representative of Muslims and should act responsibly. In the study, the data shows that the majority of students agreed on their roles assigned by Muslim society. However, there are

some students who are against this responsibility assigned by other Muslims. For instance, Meryem argues how she is against the idea of veiled Muslim women being representative of Muslims. She explains how her roles have changed in the United States as a 'representative'. She says:

In Turkey, I only represent religious Turks: more religious, more conservative Turks... But in the United States, I represent whole Muslim world. I don't like that. That is a lot of people [laugh]. I don't want to be representative of some people, some Muslim people... I really don't... they make me feel responsible... "OK. I need to represent whole Muslim world. I need to be a really good Muslim" I don't want that duty on me. So, I don't do anything about it. Even though people are expecting me to do that, I don't. I try to be myself. I just try to be really friendly to other people. That is my only duty ... I don't like people giving headscarfed girls that duty [to be more responsible and more modest]. "OK. Now, you are wearing a headscarf, you have to be really modest." No, it is not your duty. She doesn't represent me or I don't represent her. We are still individuals.

In addition, regarding modesty, students emphasize that wearing the headscarf also means modesty and it helps people become modest. In this context, they explain the importance of wearing the headscarf in terms of being modest and having responsibility. For instance, Syrian graduate student Elmira says:

The scarf isn't just putting a piece of clothes on your head. It is about modesty not only in your dress but also in your actions. It is part of your character. It is part of my identity; it is a constant reminder of who I am and who I would like to be.

Furthermore, 14% of interviewees explain that wearing the headscarf is a part of their identity. At the same time, all students agree with the idea that by wearing the headscarf a woman can be identified as Muslim by other people. So, for them, wearing the headscarf is important to show their Muslim identity. For instance, Elif, 28-year-old Turkish graduate student who started wearing the headscarf in the United States, explains this importance as follows:

It shows that I am a Muslim among all people and I like this feeling. I get 'salam' from other Muslim people. One day, I went shopping. While I was in Walmart, I saw a Muslim American woman wearing the headscarf. She was with her mother and sister; they were not wearing the headscarf. So, I interpreted that she converted to Islam and started wearing the headscarf. She saw me and greeted me. I said her 'salam' too. She told me that 'I am really happy to see you. You made my day!' Then I learned that she came to Houston to visit her mother, and she didn't see any Muslim women wearing the headscarf. She asked me about Muslims and mosques in Houston. Her eyes were full with tears while we were talking. We hugged each other and left. It was a wonderful experience for me. If I weren't wearing the headscarf, she couldn't notice that I am a Muslim. She wouldn't be happy and I wouldn't be either. By wearing the headscarf, I can show people that I am a Muslim, and they can realize it from my scarf. I like this.

On the other hand, in addition to the meaning of the headscarf, all interviewees concur with the idea that wearing the headscarf sends people a religious message, identifying the wearer as a Muslim and not a political or cultural message. They emphasize that it is a symbol of their identity as Muslim. All of them also agree that wearing the headscarf does not show

the level of religiosity. It does not mean that a Muslim woman wearing the headscarf is more religious than those who do not wear the headscarf. For instance, Indian graduate student Tahara says:

It doesn't show how much iman [faith] you have or what kind of good person you are . . . when you wear hijab, it doesn't mean you have become super religious and just because you don't wear the hijab doesn't mean you are inferior to someone who does wear hijab . . . I think it is very small part of the religion . . . I think it is the later part of your iman [faith]. Mainly, it gives you an identity as a Muslim.

Regarding political and cultural messages, as noted before, no interviewee mentions that there is a political or cultural message that they want to send other people by wearing the headscarf. When asked if she thinks that the headscarf sends people a cultural or political message, Hanan, who started wearing the headscarf after 9/11 says:

I don't think so. The scarf isn't about culture, unless like... for example Pakistanis they always have scarfs with their outfit and that is to be modest. They don't put it on head. That is cultural to be modest but the scarf itself it is not a culture; it is religion. Politically, the only message I am trying to make is that Muslims are not terrorists.

In addition to the above meanings that the interviewees express, some of the students think that wearing the headscarf gives other people a message which indicates that the wearer has some religious rules that she wishes others to acknowledge. Similarly, Beyza, 23-year-old Turkish undergraduate student, shares how she feels this message of the headscarf serves in her daily life:

Here, for undergrads you become too close to your friends, we have like boy-friends and girl-friends... when they see you, they hug you or they like to shake hands. They are so close. But I don't want that. I want some line between boys and me especially... I don't want any guy to just come and hug me. When I have a scarf, they just come on and say "Hi" and they don't hug me. So, it gives me privacy. Also, they are more careful with their language. They can't curse...I don't know why but they respect me more right now because I have a scarf.

Meanwhile, Kyrgyz graduate student Amina explains that the headscarf sends different messages to those who already know Islam and those who do not know anything about Islam. She says:

For someone who doesn't know anything about Islam, it might send either a cultural or religious message or something like this person has some individual rules that she follows. But for someone who knows about Islam this really sends the message that "Hey! I am not a person that you can freely talk to." . . . For example, when I am with my husband and we are introduced to some family or some person, he shakes my husband's hand and he doesn't shake my hand. I noticed that he shakes some other women's hand very easily. So what is the point? You are shaking other women's hand and why you are not shaking my hand? OK. I am good if you don't shake, I am really good but that behavior shows that he just kind of hesitant to shake my hand. But why? The reason that I am wearing the scarf and he might think 'Oh, she might have some kind of restrictions so I just don't shake her hand and I will be away from her . . . This is the real message that I am sending for the people around me, that is why they are not shaking my hand that freely that they are shaking with other girls.

Meanwhile, Amina also emphasizes that she is not comfortable with some people's attitudes toward her. She argues that people have prejudices about veiled Muslim women. People think that they should be careful around a veiled Muslim woman, because she has some rules. Thus, they behave differently with Muslim women wearing the headscarf. She says that she is not comfortable with this message. She wants people to treat her as any other woman or girl. She says, "When they react like that, you think this person also have some prejudices, that is why he acted like that."

3.3. Impact of Cultural Background

The interviews conducted with veiled Muslim university students from different nationalities reveal that students' cultural backgrounds influence the age at which they started wearing the headscarf, how they started wearing it and the interpretations of their experiences in the United States.

The interview data show that the majority of the veiled Muslim students (20 out of 28) started wearing the headscarf in 11th grade or earlier. Considering that two of the students are Iranians who have to wear it in their early ages, among the others, most of the students who started veiling earlier (9 out of 18) are those who are born and raised in the United States. Meanwhile, eight of the veiled students donned the headscarf after they finished high school or during their college years. Furthermore, five of these eight students are Turkish graduate students. It is important to note that the situation in Turkey affects their decision to wear the headscarf. Until the first decade of 2000s, women in Turkey were banned from wearing the headscarf in public universities. Relevant to this ban, Turkish students note that they faced discrimination in Turkey because of their headscarf during their educational life. Because of the ban in Turkish universities, they postponed their decision to wear the headscarf, even though they had planned to wear it for many years. For instance, Sema, 27-year-old Turkish graduate student, said: "My family is conservative and I was familiar with wearing the headscarf . . . I was wearing modest clothing even if I didn't wear the scarf. (However) I didn't start wearing it earlier just because of the headscarf ban in Turkey." Similarly, an undergraduate student Beyza, who started wearing the headscarf in the United States a month ago, emphasized how her decision would be different if she lived in Turkey. She says:

(If I were living in Turkey) I would wear the scarf but probably after I graduated. I started a month ago. Now, I can wear it at university. But if I wore it in Turkey, I would wait until I graduate. Because, I don't want to open my headscarf on campus and cover outside.

In addition to all the differences, which are basically cultural, another difference arises when interviewees are asked if they have ever thought of any situation in which they might take off their headscarf. The majority of the interviewees state that they do not think any situation would warrant removing their headscarf. Nevertheless, the students who have experienced a situation in which they had to remove their headscarf before, and who also plan to return their native country in the future, are mostly more open to the possibility of taking off the headscarf. However, none of them would like to be in such circumstances.

On the other hand, for a Kyrgyz graduate student, who has been wearing the headscarf for three years, the situation is quite different. Since her family is severely against wearing the headscarf and still do not know that she is wearing it. She plans to take it off when she returns to her country.

Furthermore, it is important to state that the majority of students from other nationalities cannot imagine any situation in which they might take their headscarf off in

public. Two Pakistanis, a Syrian, a Philippino, and a Palestinian student state that they cannot even imagine facing a situation where they would take their headscarf off in the future. Although two Indians and a Pakistani student had to take off their headscarf in the past, they do not think that they would be able to take off their headscarf in the future, for any reason. In addition, only one of the students makes an exception for dangerous or insecure situations. She states that if something like 9/11 happened again, or people blame Muslims for such situations or if she is threatened, scared or is in some kind of danger due to her headscarf then she may think to take it off. She adds that she would not otherwise consider it.

3.4. Differences Between the United States and Countries of Origin in Terms of Wearing the Headscarf

The interviews reveal that all the Muslim students I interviewed state that as Muslim women wearing the headscarf they feel a difference between the United States and their country of origin, especially India, Turkey and Pakistan. All interviewees underscore the value of freedom in the United States as the major difference. Meanwhile, students interpret 'freedom' differently depending on their experiences in both the United States and their native countries.

Iranian students state that for them freedom is not related only to the headscarf but has a wider meaning. Sara says, "Here I feel myself freer but this is not related to wearing the headscarf. I feel freedom because I have right to choose my clothes, it is a personal right for everyone." In addition, Iranian students also mention the benefits of being in the United States, especially on being free. Zahra notes even though she had some biases about living in the United States as a Muslim woman wearing the headscarf, after living here she has changed her opinion. She now has seen some advantages of living in the United States. She says:

I didn't think that it could be that much easier to have a scarf here, but when I came here, I saw that you can do everything you want. You can be whoever you want to be. In the United States, you may wear everything you want and no one cares about something that you wear, just they care about your personality, they care about yourself, not your clothes. So, the advantages (are that) United States has a positive atmosphere for wearing the hijab.

For Turkish students, freedom is much more related to the headscarf and people's attitudes toward them when they wear it. They mention that they do not feel any attitude of difference towards them because of their headscarf as they do in their native country of Turkey. For instance, Zeynep, who restarted wearing the headscarf in the United States says:

Here I can't realize any difference between wearing the scarf and not. Nobody changed their attitudes, even my Turkish professor in the Lab . . . When I visited Turkey in the summer; I realized that people were staring at me. You feel like an alien in your own country. Of course, this situation would differ from one city to others. I feel more pressure there.

In addition, students from Tunisia and Turkey, where the headscarf is a controversial issue, agree that in the United States they do not feel any difference between people's attitudes in school or in the street and they even forget that they are wearing the headscarf. For instance, Turkish graduate student, Zeynep says, "here nobody makes me feel that I am wearing the headscarf." Similarly, Tunisian graduate student Nour says:

Here in United States, that is why I like this country, I sometimes forget that I am someone who (is) wearing the headscarf in the street. But in my country, I

can't forget about it. It is kind of weird that Muslim people from my country, and sometimes my family, can be more aggressive than the foreign people here about the headscarf.

Regarding advantages and disadvantages of living in the United States as a Muslim woman wearing the headscarf, the university students concur with the importance of freedom in the United States and they underscore the freedom as a main advantage of living in the United States. They state that, unlike some Muslim or European countries, in the United States people are free to wear the scarf or not to wear it.

Subjects also indicated that living in a diverse city like Houston is another advantage. They say that in Houston one gets used to seeing all kinds of people from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, they respect other people's beliefs and choices. This environment makes it easy to live in Houston as a Muslim woman wearing the headscarf. Similarly, Meryem, who lived in Huntsville before coming to Houston, emphasizes the benefits of living in a diverse city as Muslim woman wearing the headscarf. She states "people in there [Huntsville] were really surprised, because at that village there weren't any veiled Muslim women. When you wear the headscarf, you become an open target (in that society) for the judgments." She indicates one of her negative experiences, which is unexpected for her in the United States. She shares that:

In a café shop, we were just sitting. One family came in. Probably they had a son in the army. They actually think that the American government is betraying them, because they allow us to be in the United States. A woman (from that family) approached and said, "It is a shame. My son is there fighting for your people and you are here living your life" and left. We were shocked. What the hell happened? What did I do to you? Nothing. You just stopped on the street. You saw me from the window, like a headscarfed woman sitting in the coffee shop, drinking their coffee, not only with my sister and cousin, also (with) American friends. She just came in, talked and left... Our American friends apologized. They said, "we are really sorry about her. We don't know her, but she is not supposed to do a thing like that."

In addition, although the University of Houston is praised for its diverse environment by the majority of the students, two students mention their negative experiences on the campus as Muslim students wearing the headscarf. One of these examples is important to see how other students consider Muslim women wearing the headscarf. Nour, who is also a teaching assistant in her department, states how students' attitudes change while they see her in the classroom on the first day of class. She describes her own experiences as follows:

I am an instructor. The first session, whenever I go into classroom, you see that faces change. You know, an instructor with headscarf... Doesn't happen every day. (When) I get in, they see me, some of them take their stuff and go out and they would drop. I didn't say even anything about class, they didn't experience the way I teach, the way I grade, the way I behave with people... I am in and they are out! I have been teaching for three semesters. At least, I have been having one in each semester: good morning and they will go out and they will drop the class.

Nour interprets her experiences in the classroom by saying that even though students are accustomed to seeing many veiled Muslim students on campus, they still judge anybody by their appearance at first glance as other people do outside the campus.

In addition, some interviewees did have fear/misgivings about American attitudes toward them. Elmira says that especially after 9/11, Muslims have had to defend themselves in society. Therefore, people's lack of information about Muslims, and Islam in general, is one disadvantage of living in the United States. She also mentions difficulties of living in non-Muslim countries, in general, as exemplifying the disadvantages of living in the United States. She says, "In some cities in the United States, seeing people with the scarf is not common. (So) you feel different; people look at you little strangely. I don't feel strange in Syria; it is more common to see women wearing the headscarf."

Although the majority of university students agree with the opinion that living in the United States is preferable to living in other countries, some students indicate the discrimination and racism they face in the United States. For instance, Hera told about the racism she faced:

I was once in the parking lot of a mall and I saw an empty spot so I raced to it, then I realized there was someone else waiting for it before me. Then when I got out of the car the person who was waiting came back and rolled down her window and said "this is why Americans hate you, go back to your country!"

4. CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Muslim female students at the University of Houston understand wearing the headscarf in light of their experiences in the United States and their countries of origin. Interview data reveal that the participants' cultural background and experiences either in the United States or in their countries of origin affect their opinions and attitudes toward the headscarf.

As in previous research, mentioned in the first part of the article, in this study the majority of participants, from all countries state religious belief as a main reason for wearing the headscarf. Religious beliefs and observing religious obligations are the main motivation factors for them to continue wearing the headscarf. Even though a majority of the Muslim students mention religion as a reason for their behavior, the effects of their religious beliefs can be seen more clearly in the responses of the students who have experienced discrimination either in their families or by society because of their decision to wear the headscarf.

In addition to religious reasons, psychological and social difficulties that the participants faced in their lives also affect their decision to begin to wear the headscarf. Primary among these difficulties, the discrimination against Muslims after the 9/11 terrorist attacks has played an important role in shaping the experiences of Muslims in general and veiled women in particular.³¹ Since the headscarf is seen as one of the visible symbols of Islam, Muslim women wearing the headscarf became a target for scapegoating after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.³² For this reason, many families did not want their daughters to wear the headscarf in public, and even some of the families encouraged their daughters to take it off during that time because of the security reasons. However, the attacks and the reactions of the society to Muslims living in the United States actually encouraged some participants to wear the headscarf. Mainly, Muslim women started wearing the headscarf to show friends and neighbors whom they have known for years that they are Muslims but that they definitely

³¹ Michelle Byng, "Symbolically Muslim: Media, Hijab, and the West", *Critical Sociology* 36/1 (2010), 114.

³² Etsuko Maruoka, *Veiled Passion: Negotiation of Gender, Race and Religiosity among Young Muslim American Women* (New York: State University of New York at Stony Brook, PhD Thesis, 2008), 77.

do not support the terrorist attacks. This result confirms the statement that there has been a growing emphasis on the headscarf among Muslim American women after the 9/11 attacks.³³

The study also refutes the Western perception of the headscarf which often conceptualizes the headscarf as a sign of women's oppression and characterizes Muslim women as passive hijab wearers. Westerners often suspect that Muslim women wear the headscarf mostly because their families or societies force them to do so.³⁴ The interviews show that none of the participants wear the headscarf because of family pressure. Conversely, some of the students in the study started wearing the headscarf in spite of their families' opposition. Meanwhile, although for students who started wearing the headscarf at a young age, between 9-13 years old, the influence of the family seems obvious, it does not always come in the form of pressure. Rather, family members, especially female relatives, are considered as 'role models' by many of the Muslim students.

Ruby's study on the concept of hijab and its meanings to Muslim immigrant women in Canada indicates that "the hijab disempowers non-wearers" because the Muslim community perceives unveiled Muslim women as not "good" Muslims.³⁵ Unlike this result, in this study all participants stated positive and nonjudgmental statements about unveiled Muslims, which is consistent with the result of Read and Bartkowski's study.³⁶ The emphasis is on the idea that becoming religious or a "good" Muslim is not directly related to wearing the headscarf. In this context, my results are consistent with Hoodfar's findings which indicate that women wearing the headscarf do not necessarily become more religious.³⁷

The result of the study is consistent with Goffman's analysis of social interaction. Goffman states that when an individual meet with others they commonly seek to gain information about them from cues which the other presents such as dress, ornaments, demeanor etc.³⁸ These clues are important because they help to define the situation and the expectations of both sides in the relation and communication process. Informed in these ways, the individuals will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from one another. In this context, the headscarf gives a message to other people about the limits of veiled women and the treatment they expect from others.

In addition, interviewees consider wearing the headscarf as a reminder of their responsibilities as Muslims in society. They feel that they have more responsibility to be a good person in general and a good Muslim in particular since their high visibility makes them representative of Muslims everywhere.

In summary, the study shows that while religious belief and observing religious obligation are the main reason for wearing the headscarf, there are also additional factor that impact women's decision to wear it, such as family's effect and social environment. The research also indicates that cultural background and the experiences of the participants played significant roles in both their decision and conceptualization of wearing the headscarf. On the other hand, as immigrant Muslim students who live in the United States they are more likely to wear the headscarf than they were in their home countries.

³³ Haddad, "The Post-9/11 Hijab as Icon", 255.

³⁴ Tabassum Ruby, "Listening to the Voices of Hijab" *Women's Studies International Forum* 29/1 (2006), 63-64; Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

³⁵ Ruby, "Listening to the Voices of Hijab", 64.

³⁶ Read and Bartkowski, "To Veil or Not to Veil?", 406-407.

³⁷ Hoodfar, "The Veil in their Minds and on our Heads", 14-15.

³⁸ Erving Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 6-10.

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Ayşe ELMALI KARAKAYA

THE PRACTICE OF HEADSCARF AMONG VEILED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES: WHY THEY WEAR THE HEADSCARF? AND WHAT DOES THE HEADSCARF MEAN TO THEM?



U N I V E R S I T Y of H O U S T O N

COMMITTEES FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

December 1, 2011

Ayşe Elmali
c/o Dr. Helen Rose Ebaugh
Sociology

Dear Ayşe Elmali,

The University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (2) reviewed your research proposal entitled "University Students' Attitudes toward Wearing the Headscarf" on November 11, 2011, according to institutional guidelines.

At that time, your project was granted approval contingent upon your agreement to modify your proposal protocol as stipulated by the Committee. The changes you have made adequately respond to those contingencies made by the Committee, and your project has been approved. However reapplication will be required:

1. Annually
2. Prior to any change in the approved protocol
3. Upon development of the unexpected problems or unusual complications

Thus, if you will be still collecting data under this project on **September 1, 2012** you must reapply to this Committee for approval before this date if you wish to prevent an interruption of your data collection procedures.

If you have any questions, please contact Alicia Vargas at (713) 743-9215.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Rebecca Storey, Chair
Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (2)

PLEASE NOTE: (1) All subjects must receive a copy of the informed consent document. If you are using a consent document that requires subject signatures, remember that signed copies must be retained for a minimum of 3 years, or 5 years for externally supported projects. Signed consents from student projects will be retained by the faculty sponsor. Faculty is responsible for retaining signed consents for their own projects; however, if the faculty leaves the university, access must be possible for UH in the event of an agency audit. (2) Research investigators will promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects and others.

Protocol Number: 12092-02

Full Review:

Expedited Review: