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The Ideals of Muslim Women: Contrasting the Stereotypes

When thinking of the Muslim culture, one's mind might go to a few isolated terrorist incidents, but the truth behind the Islamic faith is much different than what is shown. Women in particular have a harder time when compared to men. This forms the question of why do people let this happen. As one starts to do research on Muslim women and the stereotypical roles they are expected to fulfill, one discovers that there is far more than what is portrayed in the media. Americans seem to stereotype Muslim women as people that wear the hijab meaning that they are oppressed. In order to become responsible global citizens, it is important to bring these misconceptions to light. **These stereotypes differ from and overlook the diversity and complexity of real Muslim women's lives. (i.e. wearing the hijab, being oppressed, etc.)**

Think about the Islam faith for a second. Now of Muslim women and the way they are perceived by non-Muslim Americans. Women in this faith have to live up certain standards that Islam

puts towards the women as a whole. Men are seen as superior to women, but this was not always the case in the Islam culture. The world is one big mess of people that are all trying to live together in one peaceful unity; well, peaceful in a way that each person lives their own life.

Stereotypes seem to be what we as Americans seem to believe and/or trust in. These stereotypes make people question, what they believe, what they hear through the grapevine or what they truly see in our daily lives. This use of stereotypes is a common theme in the Muslim culture, especially when it comes to the gender roles placed on women. Growing up in a world that is based on stereotypes and whether or not these stereotypes are believable is what Muslims are dealing with every day. These false accusations fill the world with fear of Muslims and whether or not the news highlights are real or just for publicity. Living in the world of the unknown, we are made to assume that these lies are truly the facts. Throughout extensive research on Muslim women and the stereotypes that are cast upon them, one starts to realize how harsh the world truly is. Many of the researchers are Muslims themselves and are living in the world of a not-so-stereotypical Muslim life.

Muslim women have had to go day in and day out knowing that they are stereotyped as terrorists with the negative light shone on them as a culture. A few Muslim women resort to self-immolation; this is “defined as the act of intentionally setting oneself on fire.” The reason behind the self-immolation is usually due to abuse from their significant other. Women are purposely doing this to themselves and most of these cases are not reported properly. Islam was not supposed to defile women in the ways that it is now. Muhammad was able to do the “female” household chores, it wasn’t until later that Islam started to discriminate by gender.¹

Self-immolation is just one of the many things that Muslim women do to take away the pain that is inflicted upon them. Self-immolation brings up the question about how this affects the way non-Muslims look at Muslim women. There are many traditions that the Muslim women are having to go through that do not fit the stereotypical Muslim life. When thinking of a Muslim, does the mind go to the women that are being stereotyped or the truth behind the hijab. Women have been seen as inferior to men for quite some time now, but the thing that is different between

¹Elizabeth A. Campbell, Isabelita Z. Guiao, “Muslim Culture and Female Self-Immolation: Implication for Global Women’s Health Research and Practice,” *Health Care for Women International* 25 (9), doi: 10.1080/079933049053159. 782

Muslim women and non-Muslim American women is the fact that non-Muslim whites are not seen as terrorists.

The Islam faith has many different traditions that some do not feel are morally correct. One of these is through female circumcision. Female circumcision is a ritual that is performed at a very young age, and it shows unity with the faith. Lynda Newland saw this happen first hand to a seven-month old child. Supposedly this is an ancient tradition that the United Nations is trying to eliminate from the Muslim community.² Female circumcision is not usually something that comes to mind when thinking about Muslims, and their traditions.

Going from the horrors of the Muslim culture to some of the stereotypes that people force around the Muslim culture. One stereotype is the hijab; what people don't know is that the woman has the choice of whether or not they want to wear the hijab or not. Eventually people will start to learn that Muslims are just like anyone else, people are people no matter what religion they fall under. This however will take some time and effort from each and every person to achieve.

² Lynda Newland, "Female Circumcision: Muslim Identities and Zero Tolerance Policies in Rural West Java," *NeuroImage*, July 11, 2006, Academic Press, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277539506000308>.

In certain areas of the world, Muslim females are not able to participate in any sort of sport, well that has now changed. This is starting change now that certain parts of the Middle East are starting to let female Muslims participate in sports. Geoff Harkness goes into great detail stating that some sports companies are starting to make hijab “uniforms.” This is a game changer for Muslim women that have always wanted to be treated the same as the man that is in front of them. Harkness gives the examples of the Hijood, which is a head covering for a swimsuit.³ This helps these Muslims still follow their faith and morals.

The personal experiences that these women go through are far from what the stereotypical life is like. Ghada Hashem Talahami is not one that is considered stereotypical. She is a European Muslim woman. She has been studying the Muslim culture for years and truly wants the facts of the Islam faith to be out in the world. She states “Most of the arguments about the perceptions of Islam today invariably affect women, first by demonizing the civilization and culture with which they are associated, and then by disparaging the status of women within Islam.”⁴ Does that perspective fit the social norms of the Muslim

³ Geoff Harkness, and Samira Islam. “Muslim Female Athletes and the Hijab,” *Culture Reviews*, November 14, 2011., 64-65, Doi: 10.4135/9781506352299.n23.

⁴ Ghada Hashem Talhami, “European, Muslim and Female,” *The Canadian Journal of Chemical Engineering*, May 20, 2004, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ju.1061->.

life? It all depends on the side of the argument that someone stands.

Well, Jamillah A. Karim, conducted a study to see how it is to be black and a Muslim woman. Having the personal account of multiple Muslim women forces one to maybe change their views. The three different accounts all have different stories but a common theme. Melanie is one of the accounts that was interviewed. Now she has her own personal experience with this life that is not so called normal. Melanie states, “I hate to say this but even though we are all Muslim sisters, once we leave out this door and we go out into this society, I’m going to be treated differently from you. Not because, ‘Oh, you’re prettier, or wealthier, or you’re kinder,’ but because I strike than as an African American person, plain, and simple.”⁵ Melanie is not the only Muslim female that truly feels this way. The way that society demonizes the African American culture and then combining that with being a Muslim, one starts to realize that stereotypes hurt.

Caroline Berghammer and Katrin Fliegenschnee wrote an article about how it might be the right thing to show the world the affects that stereotyping has on Muslim families and their ordinary

⁵ Jamillah A. Karim. “To Be Black, Female, And Muslim: A Candid Conversation about Race in the American Ummah.” *Taylor and Francis Online*. August 2006.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13602000600937655>.

lives. They interviewed three different women, from three different ethnic backgrounds with the same questions across the board and then compared the stories. The researchers found out, “in line with previous results, we find that Muslim religiosity is multidimensional; and suggest that it consists of *faith* and *behavior* the latter dividing in *rituals* and *duties* and *ethical behavioral principles*.”⁶ Meaning that the Muslim culture is not one dimensional it is rather more diverse than one can seem to understand. This study helps to show that everyone’s life is different causing life and the world to be diverse.

To even think that any of these stereotypes could actually be true one might have to hear it from a personal account. May Al-Fartousi wrote an article on the life that she went through. She is a Canadian Muslim that teacher. Now she knows that her life does not fit the stereotypes put on the Muslim women, but this just shows how much times have changed. One thing she said, “My spirituality is inspired by the religio-historical revolution lesson of Karbala which empowers me with the importance of sacrifice, love, and care for others,”⁷. This here is an example of someone

⁶ Caroline Berghammer, and Katrin Fliegenschnee. “developing a Concept of Muslim Religiosity: An Analysis of Everyday Lived Religion among Female Migrants in Austria.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*

⁷ May Al Fartousi. “(Un)Veiling Equity: A Critical Analysis of the Insider and Outsider Roles of a Muslim Female Shi’i Educator in Academy.” *Contemporary Justice Review* 16 (3): 327–40. 2013. doi:10.1080/10282580.2013.828915.

who knows what it is like to be stereotyped because of the religion that she associates with.

Just think, what a life would be like if there was always stereotyping around. Maybe one should consider the effects that it has on that person. Semiha Topal states, “Now it is important to explore the bodily practices of hijab and the obligatory ritual prayer,”⁸ Not every single Muslim should be classified by whether or not that female is wearing the hijab. Society seems to over generalize everything in the world around to make life easier. Not knowing that every Muslim has the decision whether to wear the headdress or not.

These Muslim women were thinking about the stereotypes going around when the headlines were saying that the Mosque was not the right place to pray. Thing being is why does the world let this stuff happen on a day-to-day basis. Rachel Woodlock gets into detail about the gender discrimination in the Islam faith. She goes into the lives of people that were facing this everyday hoping that they could pray when and where they wanted.⁹ Praying is a ritual

⁸ Semiha Topal, "Female Muslim Subjectivity in the Secular Public Sphere: Hijab and Ritual Prayer As technologies of the Self". *Social Compass* 64, no. 4 (2017): 582-96. doi:10.1177/0037768617727485.

⁹ Rachel Woodlock. "Praying Where They Don't Belong: Female Muslim Converts and Access to Mosques in Melbourne, Australia." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30 (2): 265–78. doi:10.1080/13602004.2010.494076.

that Islam promotes and wants the followers to do, although not everyone has to pray to the same extent.

Now switch the roles, let's have the Muslims be at the top of the totem pole and the stereotypical non-Muslim White American at the bottom. One might start to realize that stereotyping is not something that makes the person feel satisfied, it is usually a way to divert the attention to someone else, thus being the Muslim women. However, there are non-Muslim White American terrorists but society hates to acknowledge that someone of the same kind would do such a thing.

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