


Discuss the significance of World Hijab Day, and whether it can be considered an 'ironic hypocritical farce'.

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World Hijab Day is an annual event held on February 1st every year in over 140 countries. It was founded by New Yorker Nazma Khan in 2013 and attempts to encourage women of all religions and backgrounds to experience the hijab for a day, in order to foster religious tolerance.¹ The event seeks to recognise the choice of millions of Muslims to wear the hijab, by promoting education and understanding. Yet it has been widely criticised by many, such as by A.J. Caschetta who accuses the day of being an ‘ironic hypocritical farce’ that fails to recognise that many women live under Islamist regimes or with fundamentalist families and are thus forced to wear the hijab rather than freely choose to wear it.²

This essay will consider this claim by firstly studying the purpose of World Hijab Day and its significance, before discussing the global support that it has received. It will then move to analysing the various critiques of the day, such as those made by Maryam Namazie, Maajid Nawaz and Caschetta himself. It will finally discuss the No Hijab Day campaign, founded by Yasmine Mohammed as a direct response to the inadequacies and oversights of World Hijab Day. This essay will conclude that whilst World Hijab Day does erroneously assume that the experience of hijab wearers (hijabis) is universal, both it and No Hijab Day are significant because of their vital work to address discrimination and fundamentalist oppression against women. Thus it is because of this that World Hijab Day cannot be considered an ironic hypocritical farce.

¹ ‘Our Story’, World Hijab Day, 2018. <<https://worldhijabday.com/our-story/>> (accessed 17th February 2021).

² A.J. Caschetta, ‘The irony and Hypocrisy of World Hijab Day’, National Review, 20th January 2020. <<https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/01/world-hijab-day-irony-hypocrisy/>> (accessed 17th February 2021).




In order to discuss the significance of World Hijab Day, an understanding of the hijab is required. The word hijab traditionally means 'partition' or 'curtain' in Arabic, but today it is used more colloquially to refer to the headscarf worn by Muslim women.³ When hijabs were originally introduced, they were a symbol of religious identity. They made Muslim women easily identifiable in the 7th century tribal society of Saudi Arabia in which Islam developed. Whilst it is still an overt symbol of the Islamic faith, the hijab today is used to connect women to God by serving as a constant reminder of their submission and commitment, thereby helping to maintain this spiritual relationship. Wearing it is also a sign of modesty, reflecting the strong emphasis of the Islamic dress code on covering the body and hair to prevent women from being sexualised and maintain their personal honour. Head covering for modesty is similarly practised in faiths such as Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism. For example, many Orthodox Jewish women will cover their hair with scarves and hats (particularly after marriage) or wear wigs to prevent from showing their natural hair completely.⁴

World Hijab Day is significant because it celebrates women who choose to wear the hijab; it rejects the stereotype that women only wear it because they are forced to by male fundamentalist family members. It aims to counteract controversies surrounding the hijab that, in recent years, have seen it become 'a symbol of oppression and divisiveness that bears the brunt of a larger debate about Islam in the West'.⁵ Today, because they are visibly identifiable as Muslim, hijabis are easy

³ Mariam Khan, *It's not about the Burqa* (Picador, London: 2019), p.xii.

⁴ Susan Weiss, 'Under Cover: Demystification of Women's Head Covering in Jewish Law, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 17:1 (2009), p.100. (89-115)

⁵ Catrin Nye, 'Hijab for a day: Non-Muslim women who try the headscarf, BBC News, 31st January 2013. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21283301>> (accessed 17th February 2021).




targets for Islamophobic hate crimes. 69% of Muslim women who wore a hijab reported at least one incident of discrimination compared to 29% of those who did not.⁶ Acts of hijabi discrimination take place every day, as data from The American Civil Liberties Union shows.⁷ Women in workplaces like schools and the police force have been prevented from wearing their hijab, and risk being fired for refusing to remove it. In countries such as Austria, France and Kosovo, the hijab is banned in public schools and students globally have been forbidden from participating in extra-curricular activities whilst wearing their hijab. Women have even been forbidden from wearing the hijab in malls, pools, amusement parks, public buildings, courts and in jail- even if they are just visiting.

World Hijab Day is significant because it aims to target this discrimination, which it acknowledges stems from a lack of knowledge and understanding of Islam and specifically the hijab. Not only does the event invite non-Muslim women to don the hijab for the day (thereby normalising it), but it also targets hijabi oppression by conducting outreach programs, such as those directed at businesses to end workplace discrimination for hijab-wearing women. They hold workshops to equip Muslim women with the skills needed to land jobs without compromising their faith and mentoring programs for them to unleash their full potential and stop seeing their hijab as a barrier. Online resources are also available, such as an online publication to address misconceptions around the hijab and provide further education.

Moreover, in 2021, when the theme of the day was “Don’t let our pride be your

⁶ Rana Elmir, ‘How Muslim women bear the brunt of Islamophobia’, The Washington Post, 16th September 2016. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/09/16/how-muslim-women-bear-the-brunt-of-islamophobia/>> (accessed 17th February 2021).

⁷ ‘Discrimination against Muslim Women- Fact sheet’, ACLU, November 2008. <<https://www.aclu.org/other/discrimination-against-muslim-women-fact-sheet>> (accessed 17th February 2021).




prejudice”, an online conference was held in celebration of the day with talks including *Decoding the hijab as a symbol of oppressive narrative* and *Demonization of Hijab in Media*.

The day has received global support for the significant work it does, with events being held in Australia, Ethiopia, Ireland, Pakistan, Spain and Zambia to name a few. It has reached these vast audiences through mainstream media coverage by outlets such as the BBC, the New York Times, Huffington Post and CNN, but more importantly, by harnessing the power of social media and using hashtags such as #EmpoweredinHijab and #EndHijabophobia to promote the cause and its events. Examples of this worldwide support include the State of New York recognising the event in 2017, with assemblyman David Weprin arguing that it was ‘rooted in the American principles of religious freedom and liberty’.⁸ Additionally, current New York State Senator Roxanne J. Persaud endorsed the day, stating that it ‘presents an opportunity to learn, thus leading to less discrimination’.⁹ She also linked showing tolerance to the recognition of human rights. This is notable because it truly shows the significance of World Hijab Day- combating hijabi discrimination protects their universal human right to freely practice their religion.

The United Kingdom has also embraced World Hijab Day. In 2017, an event was held to mark the day by MP Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh in the House of Commons and it was attended by then-Prime Minister Theresa May. Her support can be starkly

⁸ ‘Assemblyman David Weprin issues statement in support of ‘World Hijab Day’, World Hijab Day, 1st February 2016. < <https://worldhijabday.com/assemblyman-david-weprin-issues-statement-in-support-of-world-hijab-day/>> (accessed 17th February 2021).

⁹ Nila Choudhury, ‘Meet Nazma Khan, the trailblazer behind World Hijab Day’, The Teal Mango, 31st January 2018. < <https://www.thetealmango.com/latest/meet-nazma-khan-trailblazer-behind-world-hijab-day/>> (accessed 17th February 2021).




contrasted to that of her predecessor's, David Cameron. In 2013, the then-Prime Minister said that he would 'back up' schools and courts that asked women to remove their hijabs- thus the attendance of May to a World Hijab Day event hijab- shows it has made in changing public opinion.¹⁰ In 2021, further support was demonstrated in the Philippines as the House of Representatives approved a bill declaring an Annual National Hijab Day to promote the understanding of the Muslim tradition. Passed by 203 lawmakers, the bill encourages women to wear the hijab and aims to 'remove misconceptions, stop discrimination against hijabis, protect the freedom and practice of religion, and promote appreciation and acceptance of diversity in the expression of faith'.¹¹

Therefore the overall significance of World Hijab Day is clear. It celebrates the free choice of Muslim women to wear the hijab and aims to counteract the controversies surrounding it, such as it being a divisive symbol of fundamentalist Islam. It actively targets discrimination towards hijabis by educating the public about the choice to wear a hijab, so as to foster greater religious tolerance and understanding. This, as Persaud pointed out, helps to protect the universal human right to freedom of religious practice. The global support that the day has received further exemplifies its significance, as it has led to countries around the world showing their support for women who choose to wear the hijab.

¹⁰ James Kirkup, 'David Cameron supports Muslim veil ban in schools and courts', The Telegraph, 29th September 2013. <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/10342501/David-Cameron-supports-Muslim-veil-ban-in-schools-and-courts.html>> (accessed 17th February 2021).

¹¹ Divina Nova Joya Dela Cruz, 'House Oks bill declaring National Hijab Day', The Manila Times, 26th January 2021. <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2021/01/26/news/latest-stories/house-oks-bill-declaring-national-hijab-day/833020/>> (accessed 17th February 2021).




In spite of this, the day has still been criticised, most scathingly perhaps by A.J. Caschetta who has accused it of being an ironic and hypocritical farce. He makes three compelling arguments against World Hijab Day, the first regarding its very premise: celebrating the choice of women to wear the hijab. Caschetta finds it ironic that ‘an American Muslim woman is protesting for the freedom to wear a hijab in the freest country on earth’ whilst ignoring the plight of women in countries such as Iran, who are forced to wear the hijab by law.¹² This Western celebration hypocritically promotes the right to choose the hijab in countries where it already exists, whilst failing to fight for it in countries where women do not have the free choice to choose, and may face persecution for rejecting and refusing to wear the hijab.

Linking to this, Caschetta secondly argues that the date of World Hijab Day is ironic because it coincides with February 1st, 1979- the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran from his French exile to inaugurate the Islamic Revolution. Whilst this may have been coincidental, this date is problematic because upon his return, Khomeini claimed that Iranian society needed purging of its Westoxification. He thus implemented ‘purdah’- the enforced separation, seclusion, and covering of women- the latter, his President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr claimed, would ‘prevent women’s hair from emitting invisible rays that drove men insane’.¹³ Thus the irony of celebrating the free choice to wear the hijab on the anniversary of the return of Khomeini is evident, as veiling is mandatory in Iran and even peacefully protesting it carries a maximum sentence of 10 years imprisonment.¹⁴

¹² Caschetta, ‘The Irony and Hypocrisy of World Hijab Day’.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ ‘Iran: Dozens of women ill-treated and at risk of long jail terms for peacefully protesting compulsory veiling’, Amnesty International, 28th February 2018. <<https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/01/world-hijab-day-irony-hypocrisy/>> (accessed 18th February 2021).



Finally, the design of World Hijab Day to foster religious tolerance implies that discrimination against hijabis will stop if non-Muslim women wore the hijab for a day. Caschetta argues that this is ironic because ‘Muslim women suffer the greatest discrimination from the Muslim men that dominate their lives’, rendering the day a farce.¹⁵ Phyllis Chesler, a leading authority on honour killings, points out that a common femicide motive is a victim being deemed too westernised by their family, which often means refusing to wear the hijab or wearing it improperly.¹⁶ One such example is the murder of 16-year-old student Aqsa Parvez in Canada in 2007 by her father and brother for objecting to their demands to wear the hijab.¹⁷ This therefore suggests that World Hijab Day ought to, more importantly, support the right of women not to wear the hijab, because the consequences of this choice are far more dire.

The criticisms of Caschetta are not unique, as many others have voiced their concerns about World Hijab Day. Campaigner and ex-Muslim Maryam Namazie argues that the day is as ironic as celebrating a World Child Marriage Day or World Female Genital Mutilation Day, because they are all tools used to ‘control, restrict and suppress women as girls.’¹⁸ Therefore why should the hijab be celebrated, if it is a root cause of female oppression? Moreover, the journalists Asra Nomani and Hala Arafa argue that political Islam, or Islamism, promotes the sexist ideology that the hijab is required because women are a sexual distraction to men and must be

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Phyllis Chesler, ‘Worldwide Trends in Honour Killings’, *Middle East Quarterly*, 17:2 (2010), pp.3-11. (3-11 in bibliography)

¹⁷ Luis Granados, ‘Saving Aqsa Parvez’, *The Humanist*, 70:5 (2010), p.18. (pp.18-21)

¹⁸ Maryam Namazie, ‘On World Hijab Day’, Maryam Namzie, 4th February 2014. <<https://maryamnamazie.com/on-world-hijab-day/>> (accessed 18th February 2021).

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covered up so as to protect their honour.¹⁹ Thus they ask women not to support World Hijab Day as it would mean standing in solidarity with this ideology that has seen the hijab take on negative connotations under fundamentalist Islamist regimes such as Islamic State or Taliban Afghanistan.

Finally, activist Maajid Nawaz argues that the focus of World Hijab Day on Western women is hypocritical and wrong because for women living under theocracies and fundamentalist regimes, every day is World Hijab Day. Even in countries where wearing the hijab is not mandatory, the ramifications of not doing so are that dangerous that the choice of whether or not to wear it is not free at all- it is a choice between life and death. Nawaz consequently points out that supporting Muslims can and ought to take the form of supporting their right not to wear the hijab, instead of allowing non-Muslim to 'indulge their orientalist fetish by covering their heads'.²⁰ He proposes that the day be renamed Hijab Is A Choice Day, as currently it is a farce that ignores the damage done by fundamentalists in enforcing hijab wearing.

As these criticisms show, World Hijab Day wrongly assumes that the experience of hijabis is universal; it neglects supporting the subjugated women living in fundamentalist regimes who wish to be freed of its mandatory enforcement. These weaknesses were recognised by Yasmine Mohammed, who in 2018 started the No Hijab Day campaign, in celebration of women who have defied social censure and

¹⁹ Asra Q. Nomani, Hala Arafa, 'As Muslim women, we actually ask you not to wear the hijab in the name of interfaith solidarity', The Washington Post, 21st December 2015. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/21/as-muslim-women-we-actually-ask-you-not-to-wear-the-hijab-in-the-name-of-interfaith-solidarity/>> (accessed 18th February 2021).


²⁰ Maajid Nawaz, 'The Great Hypocritical Muslim Cover-Up', The Daily Beast, 26th June 2017. <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-great-hypocritical-muslim-cover-up> > (accessed 18th February 2021).



the state to remove their hijabs. She says that it supports women who want to choose whether or not to wear the hijab, and those who ‘fight against misogynist governments that will imprison them for removing their hijab, or abusive families and communities that will ostracize, abuse and even kill them’.²¹ As part of No Hijab Day in 2019, women shared photos of themselves using the hashtag #FreeFromHijab (countering the #FreeInHijab of World Hijab Day), either of themselves covered up with captions about being forced to wear the hijab, or photos without the hijab alongside captions describing the consequences they had suffered for removing it. Mohammed describes the hijab as a ‘physical representation of the dehumanization, subjugation and vicious misogyny that is forced on women’ and describes her campaign as an effort to support women fighting for ‘freedom from ancient patriarchal rules’, something that she believes World Hijab Day fails to do.

Therefore, when one takes into account the criticisms above and the creation of No Hijab Day, the claim of Caschetta that World Hijab Day is an ironic hypocritical farce is understandable. It does neglect the millions of Muslim women who cannot choose whether or not to wear the hijab, and the dire consequences that they may face for defying these rules. It fails to appreciate that it is not non-Muslim women that hijabis need saving from, but their own families or the fundamentalist Islamist regimes that they live under. The day also ignores the fact that the hijab has become, in some parts, a symbol of archaic sexist ideology about modesty and honour and is used as a tool to control and suppress women.

²¹ Yasmine Mohammed, ‘Support Muslim women in fight against hijab’, Toronto Sun, 1st February 2019. <<https://torontosun.com/news/provincial/opinion-support-muslim-women-in-fight-against-hijab>> (accessed 18th February 2021).



However, despite its pitfalls, World Hijab Day on the whole is still significant because it does actively work to target discrimination against women in hijabs, such as by leading outreach programs and issuing an online publication dedicated to educating people about the decision to wear the hijab. The day does create greater religious tolerance through understanding, which ultimately helps to uphold universal human rights. Both World Hijab Day and No Hijab Day help the cause of Muslim women by addressing fundamentalist oppression- and perhaps through their collaboration, a more universal event can be created that celebrates both the right of Muslim women to wear the hijab and not to wear it. Drawing on the ideas of Nawaz, this could take the form of a 'Hijab is a choice' day. Therefore overall it can be concluded that World Hijab Day, despite some downfalls, is too significant to be considered an ironic hypocritical farce.

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