



A Primer on the Niqab Debate

A recent example of a very polarized and troubling discussion on the rights of Muslim women to choose what they wear and to religious freedom and expression happened during the Federal election campaign. In early October, Harper and other prominent conservatives, declared their support for a ban on the Niqab. Stephen Harper said the Conservative government would look into a ban preventing public servants from wearing the Niqab because “that is not how we do things here.” He had previously stated that allowing women to wear the veil during citizenship ceremonies is “contrary to Canadian values since veiling is “not transparent . . . is not open and . . . is rooted in a culture that is anti-women” To read more about the Niqab debate.

On October 5, the Federal Court of Appeal rejected the government’s request to put the previous court’s ruling on hold. The previous ruling upheld the application brought by Zunera Ishaq which sought, among other things, a declaration that the Policy prohibiting face coverings was inconsistent with the Act and its regulations. The Federal court found “to impose a mandatory policy prohibiting face coverings during citizenship ceremonies was found to interfere with a citizenship judge’s duty to allow candidates for citizenship the greatest possible freedom in the religious solemnization or the solemn affirmation of the oath”

But this was not just a neutral debate. The fact that the Niqab became one of the most polarizing discussions during the election campaign resulted in a rash of Anti-Muslim, racist and xenophobic incidents including an assault on a pregnant, Muslim woman in Montreal

“Who is Harper to decide what women can and cannot wear?”

- Farrah Khan

The Niqab has drawn such heated debate in part because feminism is appropriated to bolster the case that wearing certain forms of dress is somehow inherently oppressive. In a context in which government policies have actually undermined women’s rights—to work of equal value, reproductive rights, and decent health and social services—the rhetoric of the Niqab promotes the view of Canada’s so-called social and cultural superiority at the cost of Muslim women and their communities.

The niqab as political symbol is weighed down by centuries of stereotype and mythology that equates the image of Muslim Women with an unqualified notion of oppression or a lack of progress and civilization. Within such discourses, women are blamed for wearing garments that hide them from view; but also are constructed as potentially dangerous because they choose to do so. In this seemingly

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contradictory discourse—Muslim women are seen as both passive victims and are associated with danger or with “a lack of transparency” (read deception or terror), and alternately, are viewed as collaborators in their own victimization.