

A Form of Protection

A woman following the guidelines of purdah sets the tone of how she wants to be treated. It sets the tone in the behavior and interaction between genders. It prevents women from being objectified and encourages dignity and respect for women. Islam has undoubtedly given women dignity and honor through Hijab/purdah, and has provided protection so that they can live their lives with ease and peace of mind. You may have noticed that most Muslim women who follow the practice of Hijab/purdah appear to be more relaxed and at ease with themselves. Islam has reduced the importance of physical appearance as a mark of self-esteem. A Muslim woman is free to develop her talents, and does not have to rely on her physical beauty to achieve what she wants. At the same time when a woman practices Hijab/purdah in the true manner, she fulfills her responsibility to society and gains satisfaction in the knowledge that she is able to gain nearness to Allah. Islam stresses the relationship between body and mind. Therefore, wearing outer garments and veiling of the body leads to veiling of the heart and shielding it from impure thoughts.

Hijab: An Identity of Muslim Women

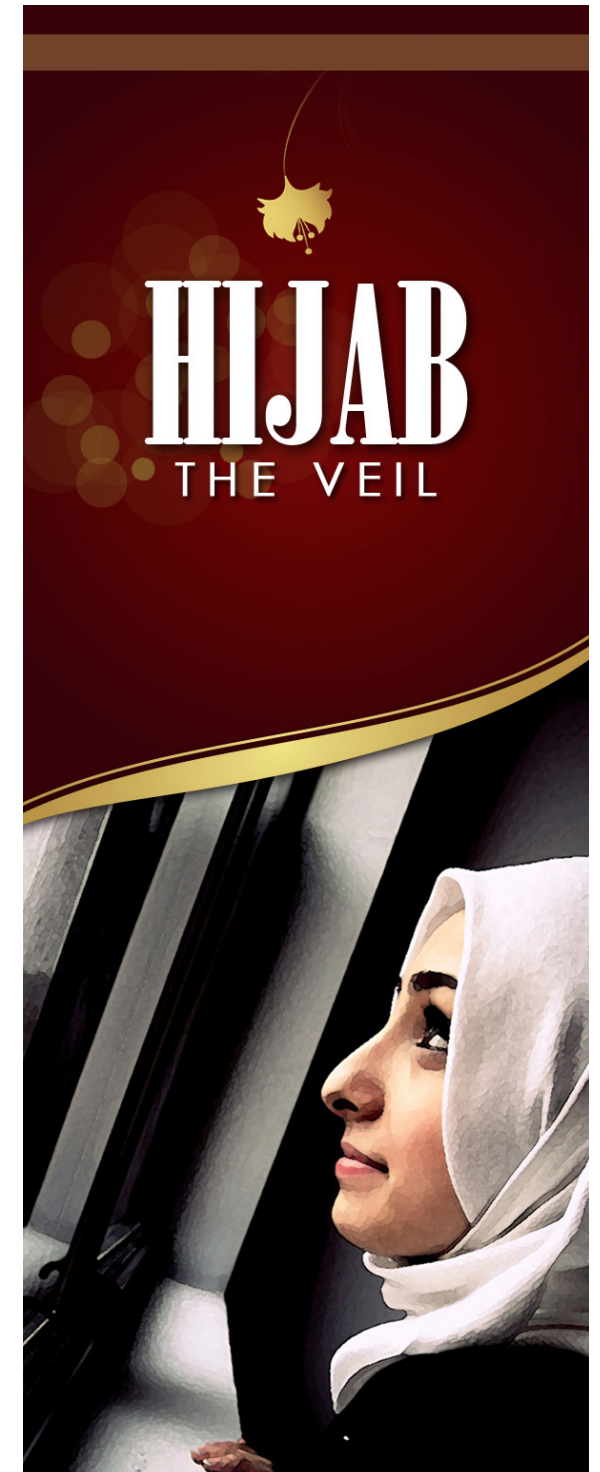
The conduct of a Muslim woman is a very important part of observing Hijab/purdah and its observance is part of her identity. Whether at work or among family and friends, a Muslim woman must conduct herself with dignity and respect. When a woman wears the veil, she makes a statement about her beliefs: she believes in conducting herself with piety and modesty; she does not want to be objectified; she wants to be judged by her character, not her looks.

The most fundamental philosophy behind Islamic teachings is that one cannot be forced to practice or observe a teaching they do not understand.

“There is no compulsion in matters of religion.” (The Holy Qur’an, 2:257)

The same goes for the Hijab. It is unfortunate that in some cases, misguided cultural practices that have nothing to do with Islam have forced women to observe the veil, against their will. The veil, although a commandment of God, cannot be forced upon any woman, and Muslim women who understand the beautiful philosophy of the Hijab not only observe it willingly, but are proud to observe the veil as a matter of personal choice.

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*In the name of Allah,
The Gracious, The Merciful*

Hijab (The Veil)

The teachings of Islam concerning Hijab (also known as the veil, scarf, dupatta, chador) and segregation of the sexes is one of the most misunderstood teachings of Islam. This is because of the widespread and misunderstood notion that observing Hijab is a heavy restriction imposed on Muslim women. In fact, the very opposite is true. Muslim women who understand the true philosophy of the Hijab find that Hijab is a means of liberating women, and protecting them from many of the society's prevalent issues. The word "purdah" is also used to describe the concept and the practice of Hijab.

Why the Veil?

Islam provides guidance not only for individuals, but also lays down moral guidelines. In this case, the institution

of Hijab/purdah guards the moral condition of society. Women and men share equal responsibility of upholding morality. The Holy Qur'an has laid down the observance of Hijab as one of the means by which to uphold morality, not just by women but also men. The Holy Qur'an states:

"Say to the believing men that they restrain their eyes and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely, Allah is well aware of what they do" (24:31)

"And say to the believing women that they restrain their eyes and guard their private parts, and that they disclose not their *natural and artificial* beauty except that which is apparent thereof, and that they draw their head-coverings over their bosoms ..." (24:32)

Therefore, it is clear that both men and women equally share the responsibility of observing this injunction. They should both restrain their looks and not ogle at one another. They are to keep their eyes lowered. In other words, they should observe purdah or veil of the eyes.

Keeping in view, the physical differences between men and women, there is also a difference in the way purdah is to be observed, as indicated in the above verses. The woman has an additional

responsibility of hiding her beauty and embellishment. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that observing the veil is an obligation for both men and women, even if it assumes different forms.

Segregation Between the Sexes

From the above verses, both men and women are to conduct themselves with modesty and safeguard their chastity at all times, especially in each other's presence. This teaching is based on the Islamic philosophy that prevention is the cure. Segregation of the sexes is prescribed to prevent intermingling of the sexes, and altogether prevent even potential situations that may lead to immorality of any kind. In this way, Islam prevents the erosion of moral values, and safeguards against social ills like adultery, fornication, unwanted or teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and sexual crimes.

Observing the Veil

Girls may start wearing the Hijab at an appropriate age, but it is common for most to start at puberty. Muslim women do not have to observe the veil in front of family and close relatives. The basic requirement, based on the Holy Qur'an, is to dress modestly, cover the head and

wear an outer garment that conceals beauty from strangers. However, there is no specific type of hijab compulsory for all Muslim women. The form of the veil adopted varies from country to country as Muslim women come from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As such, one should remember modesty is the essence of Hijab, as opposed to a particular type of covering. Muslim women who observe the veil are able to go to school, work, exercise and so on, because the Hijab in no way prevents them from functioning as regular and productive members of society.

Inner Modesty

Although, physical covering is the first step to observing purdah, the true and full observance of Hijab/purdah is achieved when "veiling" extends to a person's mind and heart. This means one should veil or shield his/her mind and heart from impure and immoral thoughts, especially when in contact with the opposite sex. One's thoughts, words and actions should reflect love and respect towards fellow beings. This behavior leads to moral upliftment and also creates an atmosphere where men and women, instead of objectifying each other, treat each other with respect and understanding.