

# Hidden Victims of International Terrorism: Muslim Women in the USA

Written by Serap Gur

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SERAP GUR, OCT 31 2016

When Larycia Hawkins, a Christian political-science professor at Wheaton College, wore a headscarf to support Muslim women and said that Islam and Christianity worship the same God, she lost her job (Graham, 2016). It was an unusual case—a Christian woman wearing a headscarf to support Muslim women—so it received attention from the public for only a short time; however, little changed for Muslim women in the United States. Every time there is a fundamentalist Islamic terrorist attack inside or outside of the US, Muslim women with headscarves, just because they are immediately recognized as Muslim, become a target of social pressures and hatred (Everet et al. 2015). Americans have always been proud of providing freedom of speech and freedom of religion to all people. So why have Muslim women been stripped of those rights? Both Muslim and non-Muslim Americans need to work together to eliminate these discriminations and hate-related crimes. Instead of portraying the Muslims as threatening and violent, politicians need to promote integration and unity for all people. Also, Muslim women who wear headscarves need to be more active and become more involved in society by taking more prominent roles and being volunteers in civil-society organizations to show other people that they are not different, and pose no threat. We need more people like Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first headscarf-wearing American Muslim women to compete in the Olympics. She got a bronze medal in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games (Harvard, 2016a). Muhammad and other Muslim women with headscarves in the Olympics showed that wearing a headscarf does not set them apart; all of them are women athletes who compete in sports. These kinds of positive examples are crucial for developing long-term attitudinal change (Harvard, 2016a).

### General Overview

In 1607, a group of farmers were sent by the English government to what is now Virginia. The colonizers of the New World experienced tremendous struggles and hardship. In fact, many of the first farmers died. However, people continued to come to the Americas. A primary reason was that those who were dissatisfied with the church in their country or who were religiously persecuted wanted to practice their religion freely in the US (Bardes et al., 2013). The United States was established with this doctrine. During the preparation and creation of the US Constitution, the delegates focused on freedom of religion and other individual rights, such as freedom of speech and freedom of press. In the first amendment to the constitution, religion is addressed in two different ways. First, the establishment clause creates a separation between church and state, and prevents the creation of an official state religion. In addition, according to the establishment clause, the government cannot support one religion over another; nor can it discriminate between religions. Second, the free exercise clause provides freedom to the people regarding religion: people are free to practice their religion of choice without government control (Bardes et al., 2013). Since the formation of the US, all people in the country ostensibly have the right to practice their religion freely. Muslims should not be humiliated and be targets based on their religious identity. This discrimination is preventing the US from being the land of equality that it promised to be. The United States was once the most desirable place for people around the world who wanted to practice their religion freely.

However, after the tragic events of 9/11, negative feelings and hate crimes against Muslims and Islam have increased (Anderson, 2002; Woods, 2003; Frumin, & Sakuma, 2016). Civil rights complaints, including harassment, violence, refusal to hire, profiling in airports, interrogations of Muslims, and refusal of religious practice in schools,

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workplaces, and prisons, have increased. The most complaints were reported by women wearing hijabs (CAIR, 2001). In other words, this freedom of religion was suspended for Muslims, and especially for Muslim women who wear headscarves. Since 9/11 more than half of American Muslims have reported that they experienced bias and discrimination (CAIR, 2016). Sixty-nine percent of Muslim women who wear a headscarf said that they faced at least one incident of discrimination after 9/11 (Rippy & Newman, 2008). Because of their headscarves, they are immediately recognized as Muslim, leading to public stigmatization (Everet et al. 2015). Women were humiliated and accused of being terrorists because of their hijabs (CAIR, 2007; Aziz, 2012). As a result of the humiliation, most Muslim women expressed feelings such as anger, insecurity, isolation, and sadness. These experiences and feelings negatively affected their lives. Some women were afraid to leave their homes or go shopping. Some of them began to question their identity (Allen, 2014; Ahluwalia & Saba, 2016; Kuruvilla, 2016). In short, they were unable to become a part of the American society.

Fifteen years later, their lives have not returned to normal. And, given the recent increase in terrorist attacks, it looks like the situation is not going to improve in the near future (Williams, 2015). Each time that there is a new terrorist attack inside or outside the country (especially in Europe), Muslims become a target. Women who wear headscarves are particularly targeted (Hennessy-Fiske, 2015). There has always been some discussion about whether or not the hijab was oppressing or controlling women; however, after 9/11 it turned to being viewed as a symbol of terrorism, violence, or threat (Aziz, 2012).

## **Muslims in the USA**

The first Muslim immigration began in the 15th century with the slave trade. At the time, 14–20% of slaves from West Africa were Muslims. Voluntary migration by Muslims began at the end of the 19th century, when Muslims from Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Palestine started to come to the US. After WWII, immigration increased and most of the new Muslim immigrants were students who came for higher education purposes (Schaeffer, 2016). In 2016, according to the Pew Research Center, the Muslim population was about 3.3 million in the US, with 46% being women and 54% men (Pew Research Center, 2016). However, there is no US census data based on religion; therefore, these numbers may not be accurate.

Muslims are perhaps the most diverse religious group in the US. They come from many different nations, and have highly varied traditions, languages, and political beliefs. Arabs constitute the majority, but not all Muslims are Arabs (Barreto et al., 2008). The Muslim population is not evenly distributed at the state level; in some states they comprise less than 1%, but others, such as New Jersey, have two or three times more Muslims than the average. The Pew Research report indicates that the Muslim population is growing faster than the other religious groups, and it is estimated that by 2040, Muslims will be the second-largest religious group after Christians in the US. Immigration is the main reason for this increased population. During the 21st century, the number of Muslim legal immigrants to the US increased dramatically, and they now comprise 10% of legal immigrants arriving in the country. A second reason for this growth is the natural increase. Most American Muslims are younger than the general population and they tend to have more children than other Americans (Pew Research Center, 2016). Notably, 65% of Muslim immigrants were born outside of the USA, but more than 77% of Muslims in the country are American citizens. They tend to be more educated than other minority groups: the majority of Muslims have attended college. Muslim women come in second place after Jewish women immigrants in education attainments (The Pew Research Center, 2016).

## **After 9/11**

Since the September 11, 2001 events, negative feelings toward Muslims and Islam have increased. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), hate crimes against Muslims increased 1,700% between 2000 and 2001 (Anderson, 2002). Actual crimes perpetrated against Muslims were 28 in 2000; the number increased to 481 in 2001 (Woods, 2003). All Muslims began to face negative stereotyping, biased and stigmatizing behaviours, negative attitudes, physical and verbal assaults, and threats (Frumin, & Sakuma, 2016). Civil rights complaints increased, and in 2001 CAIR received three times more complaints than the previous year, with 1,516 cases. These include harassment, violence, refusal to hire, profiling in airports, interrogations of Muslims, and refusal of religious practice in schools, workplaces, and prisons. However, the most complaints were hijab-related (CAIR, 2001).

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Most of the American public believes that Islam is more likely than any other religion to encourage violence (52%) and does not fit with American values and ways of life (56%). As a result, Muslims are the most disliked group in the US (Rasmussen, 2015; Public Religion Research Institute, 2015). The situation is even worse for women—almost half of Americans do not feel comfortable with Muslim women wearing the burqa (Barrick, 2011). Though there was a decrease in discrimination cases for a few years, normalcy has not returned for Muslim immigrants, and specifically for women who wear the hijab (Harris, 2016). Women have continued to face discrimination based on their headscarves. For instance, in 2007, a woman was not allowed to enter a municipal courtroom in Georgia because of her hijab (Levs, 2008). And in 2008, again in Georgia, a woman was jailed after she entered the courtroom with her headscarf (Nasaw, 2008).

## After New Terrorist Attacks—2010s

After 9/11, terrorist attacks continued worldwide, and when an attack occurred inside the United States or in another country, Muslim women wearing headscarves were disproportionately targeted. For instance, after the coordinated terrorist attacks that occurred on 13 November 2015, in Paris by the Islamic State (IS) militant group, hate crimes against Muslim women increased. A Muslim woman in London was pushed in front of an oncoming train by another woman. In Toronto, a Muslim woman was beaten after she dropped her children off at school (Nielsen et al., 2015). In New York, a young girl was attacked by boys who removed her hijab and beat her in a school. In Cincinnati, a college student who was wearing a hijab was insulted by an angry driver who was yelling and calling her a terrorist (CAIR, 2015).

Similarly, when fourteen people were killed in a terrorist attack in San Bernardino in the US by Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, who were connected with Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, Muslim women became the main target in the public. The photographs of shooter Tashfeen Malik wearing a hijab depicted a new terrorist model, and there were conversations in the news coverage as to whether or not she represented a new kind of terrorist (Crocker and Kennedy, 2015). One day after this mass shooting, one Muslim woman was verbally assaulted and kicked by a man at a bus stop in Brooklyn, New York. A woman wearing a headscarf was shot at in Tampa, Florida, as she was leaving a mosque (Crocker and Kennedy, 2015). In California, a woman who was wearing a hijab was followed and attacked by a man with a knife (Mathias, 2016). Attacking and insulting are not the only forms of discrimination. For instance, two women with headscarves were pulled off an airplane because the flight attendant did not feel comfortable with them (Harvard, 2016b). On another occasion, a woman wearing a hijab could not get an unopened can of soda because the flight attendant claimed that it might be used as a weapon; however, other people on the plane were served (Mai-Duc, 2015). These are just a few examples; there are many more. Immediately after a terrorist attack inside or outside of the US, Muslim women and girls with headscarves are insulted, assaulted, or attacked without due cause (CAIR, 2016).

## Conclusion

Muslim women across the world feel they are participating in an endless tragedy. They are constantly being attacked by the government, soldiers, or ordinary citizens. In some Muslim countries, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, women are attacked for not wearing a headscarf or a hijab, whereas in other countries, such as the USA or the UK, they have been attacked for wearing headscarves because of their religion. Following every new terrorist attack, they become a target. These violent and discriminatory acts have become accepted within society, and even legitimized. It is important to mention that no one is able to ascertain exactly why a woman is using a hijab, burqa, or headscarf, nor what it personally means to her. It is between herself and God; it may be for the purposes of forgiveness, to find a connection with God, or it might be due to pressures from her parents or political leaders. Regardless of the reason, it is no one's right to stigmatize her.

When political science professor Larycia Hawkins, a Christian woman at Wheaton College in the USA, wore a headscarf to support Muslim women and said that Islam and Christianity worship the same God, she lost her job (Graham, 2016). The university indicated that it was not because of wearing a headscarf; she was suspended, they said, because she claimed that Islam and Christianity worship the same God. After this incident, her students began to campaign to support her; they took photographs of themselves wearing headscarves and posted them on social-

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media networks (Graham, 2016). The debate about hijabs, Muslim women, and discrimination became a trendy issue for a short period of time. Nevertheless, little has changed for Muslim women. It was an unusual case—a Christian woman wearing a headscarf to support Muslim women— so it received media attention for a few days. However, the Muslim women who face discriminatory and stigmatizing behaviours in their everyday lives seldom receive attention from American society, and their stories hardly ever make the news. Americans have always been proud of providing freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion to all people. So why have Muslims, and specifically Muslim women, been stripped of these rights? Why are they continually viewed as potential terrorists because of their headscarves?

In order to achieve more tolerance and understanding, both non-Muslims and Muslims in the US must work together. On one side, our political leaders and community leaders such as mayors, university presidents, school principals, pastors, and human-rights organizations need to take responsibility and address the discrimination against Muslims and Muslim women. Instead of creating a distinction between Americans and Muslims and portraying the latter as threatening or violent, politicians need to promote integration and unity for all people. Community-engagement activities should be provided through education or dialogue by educational institutions or churches. Human-rights organizations should establish projects to increase awareness by monitoring and reporting the discrimination cases and hate crimes against Muslim women, and they need to work on solutions. In addition, women-oriented organizations and women leaders need to take active roles and address these discriminations. They need to come together, speak up in their communities, and sign petitions to show their support for Muslim women. These cases might make the news and allow people to begin to see the other side of the stories—instead of creating a threat, these women are living under threat and are becoming victims in everyday life.

On the other side, Muslim women with headscarves need to be more active and more involved in society. They need to take on more prominent roles and volunteer in civil-society organizations, which will show other people that they are not different, and do not pose a threat. If they are seen more often getting involved in social activities, people will begin to accept them more as individuals.

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