

Anti-oppressive Practice in Social Work with Women Wearing Hijab



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Abstract Religious beliefs are central to the identity of many people, often signalled by their physical appearance, for example, clothing, hair or jewellery. If prevented from such a form of self-expression, some take action against what they consider a contravention of their human rights. The predominance of this discourse can obscure the possibility that there are others who are forced to signal a religious viewpoint which they may not subscribe to. This chapter explores the wearing of hijab by Afghan women who have lived in Australia less than 10 years. While some choose to wear hijab, there were others who spoke of being forced to wear hijab as a form of domestic violence. Furthermore, whereas for some, not wearing hijab represents a freedom to dress in accordance with their understandings of Australia as a secular society, a few felt that wearing clothes which marked them as Islamic increased the likelihood of attracting xenophobia and discrimination. Hence, for many women, decisions around hijab represented compromise between the demands of their family, the Afghan community and the wider Australian society, rather than a free choice. Consequently, if social workers assume women's religious beliefs and identity are congruent with their appearance they may inadvertently be contributing to women's oppression. As such, this chapter explores notions of anti-oppressive practice when working with Muslim women living in non-Muslim majority countries, particularly in respect of dress codes which are associated with Islam.

Keywords Muslim women · Afghan women · Migration · Hijab · Anti-oppressive practice

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Introduction

Migration leading to increasing religious diversity is often accompanied by a fear of the ‘other’ (Beaman, 2018). Immigrants who are visibly different to their new communities, are frequently subject to differential and discriminatory treatment. This includes those whose attire marks them apart as having religious beliefs and practices which contrast with the majority of citizens (Colic-Peisker, 2009). As such, clothing choices for members of diasporas arguably reflect the balance between “their connections to their homeland as well their collective and individual identities in their country of residence” (Pasha-Zaidi, 2015, 89).

Although bans on wearing religious symbols have affected people of other religions, Muslim women have been disproportionately affected by such bans (Syed, 2013). While veiling has for centuries been an expression of religious devotion for women of many religions, it is often only veiling by Muslim women which is regarded as problematic (Feder, 2013). For example, hijab has been banned for state employees in some German states, as it is considered incompatible with religious neutrality (Sinclair, 2013). Elsewhere, such as in France, public bans on wearing hijab in public spaces, including schools, have been rationalised as necessary for assimilation (Syed, 2013). Although bans on wearing hijab have mostly been implemented in non-Muslim majority countries, bans have also occurred in some Muslim majority countries (Grima, 2013). For example, although now overturned (Schlötzer, 2019) in Turkey, a Muslim majority country, hijab was for a long time banned in public spaces including universities and workplaces because it was seen as a symbol of political Islam (Koo & Han, 2018).

In the absence of society-wide bans on wearing religious attire, organisational dress codes, particularly relating to employees, have sought to restrict the wearing of religious symbols, including both clothing and jewellery associated with particular religions. In some instances disputes about dress codes have been referred to courts of law by individuals who have argued that their human rights have been denied (Vickers, 2018).

In countries such as Australia, on an official level, the wearing of attire that is associated with religion is widely accepted:

(...) wearing head covering – hijabs, turbans, yarmulkes – is largely a non-issue in Australia where, for example, the Victorian Police have uniforms incorporating turbans for Sikhs and hijabs for Muslim women, and most banks permit employees to wear uniforms that conform to cultural prescriptions, most schools permit cultural variation to school uniforms, and a great diversity of culturally specific garb is evident in most shopping precincts and on public transport. (Bouma, 2016, 761)

Nevertheless, the wearing of hijab is sometimes understood as a refusal by Muslims to assimilate (Dunn et al., 2007). Furthermore, growing Islamophobia has meant “what was once a trivial unease about a Muslim woman wearing a hijab has grown into a fear of terror within Australia’s borders.” (Akbarzadeh, 2016, 323) Consequently, the wearing of hijab may be interpreted as a provocative act rather than a right to religious expression (Kadan et al., 2017), particularly as Muslim

women wearing hijab have come to be regarded as the visible symbol of Islam in Western societies. Muslim women report that members of the public approach them as victims and sometimes blame them for their silence over hijab (Hussein, 2019).

Muslim women in the United States have reported being treated suspiciously and harassed more if they wear hijab (Pasha-Zaidi, 2015). If wearing hijab places Muslim women at risk of discrimination or victimisation on the basis of their religion (Gulamhussein & Eaton, 2015), it is not surprising that many choose modes of dress that make their religion invisible to outsiders. A desire to blend in with the wider society is more likely when women have extensive links outside Muslim communities, as being invisible might help them to build or develop those relationships (Colic-Peisker & Dekker, 2017).

Visibility can also bring erroneous assumptions about Muslim women (Droogsma, 2007). Hijab is often associated with subservience, helplessness and oppression (Kakoti, 2012). Thus there can be a perception that Muslim women who wear hijab are unintelligent (Mahmud & Swami, 2010), resulting in fewer offers of employment (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Grima, 2013). In an experimental study in the United States, 14 women each sought jobs at eight businesses in a shopping mall. For half the enquiries they wore hijab, and wore identical clothing without hijab for the remaining positions. The study found that less interest was displayed in applicants wearing hijab, including them being less likely to be told there was work available, how to complete the application process and to be called back by the company (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013).

Despite the potential for being discriminated against, some women in non-Muslim majority countries choose to wear hijab and argue it is their right to make such a decision (Al Wazni, 2015). Wearing hijab can be an expression of pride in being Muslim (Jackson & Monk-Turner, 2015; Mansson McGinty, 2014). It can open up social networks by enabling Muslim women to make connections with other Muslim women in non-Muslim majority counties (Droogsma, 2007; Read & Bartkowski, 2000).

Circumstances may require women to make compromises on wearing or not wearing hijab, in opposition to their personal preferences (Grima, 2013; Read & Bartkowski, 2000). Women who wear hijab do not necessarily do so by choice (Al Wazni, 2015). Some Muslim women view hijab as a form of gendered oppression, with some only wearing it to enable the consent of male relatives to leave the house (Jackson & Monk-Turner, 2015). Others report wearing hijab in Muslim contexts to overcome disapproval from other members of the community (Mansson McGinty, 2014; Pasha-Zaidi, 2015). Hence, there are many Muslim women who wear hijab some, but not all, of the time (Jackson & Monk-Turner, 2015) and make decisions about wearing hijab varying at different life stages (Grima, 2013; Zimmerman, 2015). Muslim women are also diverse across cultures and societies regarding their approaches and decisions about wearing hijab (Al-Kazi & González, 2018). Hence, professionals like social workers should understand diversities among Muslim women, and not reducing the multiple dimensions of Muslim women's identities to a single notion of the 'Muslim world' (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2017).

Social work research on why Muslim women veil in Western countries has been limited (Hodge et al., 2017). Drawing on findings from the first author's doctoral research with Afghan women who had lived in Australia for less than 10 years, this chapter will explore what anti-oppressive practice entails with women wearing hijab. We note there are some forms of Islamic dress which involve covering a woman's face and obscuring her identity but hijab does not hide a woman's face (Syed, 2013). This chapter will focus only on the wearing of hijab rather than exploring practice issues around other forms of veiling, as this was the form of veiling about which research participants spoke. Hijab or Muslim headscarf as a symbol of Islam in western countries is an important part of Muslim women's identities (Al-Kazi & González, 2018); therefore, social workers need to improve their knowledge about hijab and associated factors when working with Muslim women.

Research Project

The findings reported in this chapter were collected as part of a social work doctoral study which aimed to explore newly-arrived Afghan women's understandings and perceptions of domestic violence (Afrouz, 2019). Semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and December 2017 with 21 Afghan women who had lived in Australia for at least 6 months but less than 10 years. The research was advertised via flyers that were prepared in Farsi (Persian) and English and distributed in communities where the Afghan community was concentrated in Melbourne and online social media platforms across Australia. Women interested in participating in research about Afghan women and their experiences of living in Australia and using community services, were invited to contact the first author. Those who volunteered to take part in the research had the choice of being interviewed face-to-face, by telephone or email, and in Farsi or English.

Eleven interviews were conducted face to face, seven via telephone and three by email. Fifteen informants were interviewed in Farsi and six in English. The quotes from Farsi interviews have been translated by the first author, for whom Farsi is the first language and quotes from English interviews are referred to as "Interview in English". Informants were asked to provide pseudonyms which have been used to report findings from individual participants.

Informants were aged between 19 and 42 but most were aged in the 25–34 range. Most identified themselves as Muslim but three informants described themselves as non-religious. They were not asked directly about the hijab during the interviews; however, they spoke about hijab when they were asked to explain the meaning of being an Afghan woman in Australia. Many tended to talk about it as an important part of their life, particularly as a challenge after moving to Australia.

Findings

Most informants described hijab as part of their culture and family values and as an obligation for Afghan women. Settling in Australia, a non-Muslim majority country where most women, including many Afghan women, do not wear hijab, gave some women the opportunity to choose their dress. Others, however, encountered strong expectations that they continue to wear hijab from both family and community.

Exercising Choice

Many Muslim women cover their hair and body in front of men outside their immediate family or while in public places. While Afghan women had historically worn hijab according to their culture and understanding of the requirements of Islam, the Taliban tightened the moral code for women's dress during its rule from 1996 to 2001. In particular, it became obligatory for women in Afghanistan to wear burqa, which is an enveloping outer garment covering a woman's body and face. Although this requirement was removed in 2001, many women in Afghanistan continue to wear hijab.

Moving to Australia, which is a more egalitarian and liberal society, opened up opportunities that were not possible in Afghanistan, including study or employment outside the home, not having an arranged marriage, and not wearing hijab. Several of the participants in this research were critical of hijab, and of those who simply accepted it as a habit, a part of their dress code or part of their identity. They believed that some women accepted to wear hijab without questioning and considering their choices. Furthermore, they regarded the wearing of hijab to be a matter of personal choice rather than a family or community obligation. Accordingly, they argued that women's decisions about hijab should be autonomous and respected. Fati, who took off her headscarf after 8 years in Australia, said:

Fati: To be honest, wearing or not wearing is not the matter, you should decide. You should have freedom from external [pressure]. You should have a conscious decision. (Interview in English)

Yet, as Yas discovered, exercising choice can have negative consequences, so much that some women may decide to recommence wearing hijab:

Yas: I think the hijab is a personal choice; somebody wants to wear red clothes while another may pick a white dress. For instance, my sister before coming to Australia did not want to wear hijab; after some years of living in Australia, she decided to wear chador [some participants referred to a headscarf as 'chador' even though this more usually describes a full-body covering]. That is her personal choice. I think if a woman cannot overcome her internal conflict when she is in Australian society, she will be let down by others. Fighting with both powers [family and wider society] makes women devastated and damages their self-confidence. Women may feel the shame and stigma of taking off the hijab, not because of their religious beliefs and ideas, but more about what other people will say behind their back. I have chosen to take off my hijab, and it is my personal choice.

So, for Yas, although family members may place pressure on woman to wear hijab, her capacity to make autonomous decisions is a critical factor in determining whether or not she wears a veil. However, for others, the decision to cease wearing hijab was much more pragmatic than ideological. Wearing hijab might cause some Afghan women to see themselves as outsiders and socially excluded from wider society in Australia. Concerned about their future in a western and non-religious society, they decided to unveil not because their attitude towards hijab had changed but because of the Australian media's highlighting of Islamic extremism. In particular, they were anxious about being judged by wider society as a Muslim, identifiable by their hijab.

Tara: I like to take off my headscarf when I go to university or work or other public places, because I am not comfortable with the hijab. I feel lonely as I am not like others and I am different. I think that religious beliefs and ideas should be personal and should not be visible to others. Because of discrimination against Muslims [in Australia], I was unhappy about being labelled by wearing hijab. I wanted to live like other Australians, but my family would not let me stop wearing the hijab. They do not like giving up hijab as it is a part of their identity and culture and [to] stop wearing hijab is assumed to damage that part of the genuine culture.

Pressure from Families

Despite Afghan women's desire for change, often beginning soon after arrival in Australia, many Afghan men try to reinforce Afghan values in their new country. This makes the process of change hard, particularly for the first generation of immigrants who might face seemingly insurmountable barriers to achieving the dreams offered by life in Australia. In the early stages of living in Australia, change might mean breaking family rules or expectations. For some women changing their ideas might be considered as a betrayal of their family.

Yas: Beliefs, characters and the way they grew up make many Afghan people accept the current way of life. If women act differently, their behaviour will not be approved by other people as they think this [Afghan lifestyle] is the best way. We had been taught that, as a woman, we should act and wear something that is appropriate for Afghan women. As we had not been living in an equal society, so even in Australia, we cannot get rid of that fear of that society. Women are worried about many things, so they would rather wear a hijab or act according to the community to be safe and comfortable. On the other hand, there are not many limitations for boys – boys usually drink alcohol and that is against our culture, but because they are men, they can do it.

For many women, negotiating hijab was an important part of their transition to living in a new country. Most believed that wearing hijab was a personal matter and demanded the autonomy to unveil. That decision was not always accepted by family members or the community and unveiling led to strong disagreements with family members. In particular, Afghan women with a religious or traditional family felt more obliged to follow the rules of wearing hijab, even if they preferred not to.

While many informants said that family members should accept an Afghan woman's decision to stop wearing hijab, a few believed that women should accept their family's expectations and wear hijab, even if it was not their preference. Mahia, for example, believed hijab should be a woman's choice, but without the family's consent to remove the headscarf, it was better to continue to wear it:

Mahia: Many families have a problem with their children [girls] about hijab because they [Afghan girls] do not want to wear it, but their family forces them. If they do not want to wear hijab, that might bring shame to their family, and this is an important conflict in Afghan families because girls are allowed to study and go to school or work in Australia, so hijab has become an important issue here. Sometimes the consequences of not wearing hijab are profound. If a family asks me about the hijab, I will say, accept your daughter's decision and do not force her to wear hijab; it is not shame, hijab should be a personal choice. However, if girls ask me whether they should take off hijab without their family's consent I will say, look to your family; if you do not have family consent to take off your hijab, it is better to act according to your family's values and traditions and wear it.

She also said that Afghan families might not let their women go out without hijab because they believed this would besmirch the family's reputation; this would bring even more limitations for those who had a disagreement over hijab. Mahia believed that girls should act according to their family's principles to keep the family intact. However, Tara who was concerned about being identified as Muslim by her clothes, reported that her family did not acknowledge the issue and prioritised their cultural obligations over her need for inclusion.

Some informants believe that covering a women's body and hair prevents men from seeing women as sexual objects. Hence, women are encouraged to wear hijab so as to be comfortable in public. However, some believed that men in Australia did not usually look at unveiled women as sexual objects, and so women should be allowed to take off their hijab in public. For example:

Shy: I know a family that had an issue with their daughter for taking off her hijab; they had strong disagreement until her father agreed to it. I think that men should understand that Australian society is well-educated [and does not look at women as sexual objects], so they don't need to be worried about wearing hijab. If in Afghanistan or Iran women go out without hijab, other people [men] sexually stare at them.

Similarly, Yas said that her father agreed with her decision not to wear hijab because it was an accepted value in Australia and men did not look at women as sexual objects for not practising hijab.

Yas: Because my father told us that men in Australia, unlike men in Afghanistan, do not stare at you when you do not cover your hair, so you are free to not wear hijab; but for my mother, it was not the case.

For women who were married, husbands were often critical as to whether women were able to enact their preference to unveil. After 4 years of living in Australia, Roia has finally received permission from her husband to take off her headscarf. Her husband had exerted control over her body by forcing her to continue wearing hijab. The extent to which this is an issue in the Afghan community is reflected by the majority of informants proposing that forcing women to wear hijab should be recognised as domestic violence among the Afghan community in Australia.

Samaneh: I told my community that violence is not just beating: it can also be verbal or restricting you from going out. Unfortunately, in our community, they do not think these acts are violence. For instance, if my husband had forced me to wear chador [headscarf], it would have been a kind of domestic violence because I did not wear hijab before my marriage – why should I do it now?

Some informants reported being subjected to domestic violence as a consequence of unveiling. For example, Angela said she was forced to wear hijab and that ceasing to wear hijab was the main reason her husband used to justify his abusive behaviour.

Pressure to wear hijab came not only from family members within Australia. Fearing disapproval led some women to conceal their unveiling from family members overseas:

Sarah: After eight years of living in Australia, still, my family do not know that I do not wear a hijab. I still pretend to be a hijabi woman in front of my family and on social media. I do not want them to be hurt and then hurt me by their judgement. I have a headscarf with me and I wear it when I want to take a photo in a public place. Many women would like to stop wearing hijab after they come to Australia, but their family or their husband force them to wear it.

So some women would rather pretend to wear the hijab than confront their family, as that might trigger dispute and dissatisfaction. This includes careful consideration as to how they are photographed and what images are placed on social media. However, while images which show women wearing hijab diffuse the potential for tension within the family, some informants did not want their Australian friends to see them in hijab.

Community Pressure

Pressure from family members to veil may relate to perceptions as to what is acceptable within the wider Afghan community. This reflected concerns of family members about other people's judgements inside the community rather than their personal beliefs:

Angela: Afghan women may have some freedom to take off their headscarf or wear a short skirt to go to university, but they should wear hijab when they go to community events because we must act like an Afghan woman in Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan. For instance, I should behave like them in front [of the] Afghan community. Having worn hijab for a long time, I have accepted the restrictions. This has led to a complex feeling of being hypocritical. I show different things in public, especially to the Afghan community, that I do not believe in.

Consequently, some women reported an expectation to wear hijab when attending Afghan community events, even if they do not wear it in other contexts:

Fati: When I go to my parent's neighbourhood, I do [wear hijab]. We wear [a] scarf there, and most of the women, the youngest, are not happy with hijab, but the community force them to do [it]. Forcing to wear hijab is a form of violence, it is something I do not want to. (Interview in English)

Roia reported similar pressure to wear hijab within the Afghan community:

Roia: It is my right to choose my clothes because I want to be like other people in Australia, not an unusual person. However, because of community judgements or the way they look at me, that puts me under pressure to wear the hijab again. So, when I am in the community, I behave like them so as not to be blamed for my behaviour and clothes.

For many Afghan families, keeping hijab meant protecting their reputation in the community and to stop wearing it brought shame and blame. Roia started to resist wearing the hijab after coming to Australia and experienced that there were in fact very real consequences for asserting her right not to veil.

Discussion: Hijab, an Islamic Responsibility or a Woman's Choice?

Hijab has become a symbol of oppression for both Western feminists and politicians (Al Wazni, 2015). As such, it represents an embodiment of Muslim identity which evokes strong emotional responses both from wearers and observers according to the cultural and personal meanings which they associate with veiling (Mansson McGinty, 2014). Consequently, where veiling is not compulsory, particularly in a non-Muslim majority country, Muslim women feel they are scrutinised whether or not they wear hijab (Zimmerman, 2015).

This scrutiny applies to researchers too. Participants' willingness to take part in research and sharing their stories about hijab might vary, depending on their views of the researcher's attitudes towards hijab (Carland, 2017). This study interviews were conducted by the first author, an Iranian immigrant woman who no longer wears hijab. It can be assumed that women who struggled with expectations to wear hijab were more comfortable sharing stories about regarding veiling/unveiling with a woman who had worn hijab in the past and could therefore be sympathetic to their situation.

Living in Australia, a country where most women do not wear hijab, prompted some Afghan informants to unveil, which was not without challenges. Some experienced disapproval from family members and/or others in the Afghan community. Women's decisions about wearing hijab depended on a complex array of factors including personal attitudes and perspectives, family and community obligations, and perceptions as to the acceptability of wearing hijab in broader Australian society. Hence, despite believing they had a right to make an autonomous decision about veiling, the reality for Afghan women is that they must comply with the expectations of others. Moreover, expectations about wearing hijab often cluster with other restrictions or expectations under the umbrella of patriarchy (Abdullah, 2015).

While the women in this study had issues with the forced wearing of hijab, there are also many young Muslim women who choose to veil, in some cases even despite their parents' discontent (Droogsma, 2007; Eid, 2015). Both compulsory veiling

and forced unveiling represent a diminishment of women's agency (Zimmerman, 2015).

Previous research has suggested that the experiences of the Afghan community are not dissimilar to those of the wider Muslim community in Australia. It has even been claimed that "the Afghan experience represents a microcosm of the larger challenges facing the many ethnic communities that follow Islam in Australia." (Akbarzadeh, 2016, 324) While recognising that such claims may be based on wishful thinking rather than verifiable fact, it is nevertheless plausible that the findings reported in this chapter apply to Muslim women from other ethnic backgrounds living in Australia.

The generalisability of the findings to other countries must also be considered. The experience of being Muslim varies between countries, and the experience in Australia is not necessarily the same as for Muslims living in other Muslim minority countries (Bouma, 2016). Unlike some previous studies in other countries which found that Muslim women were free to choose or discard hijab after migration (Al Wazni, 2015; Jasperse et al., 2012), many informants in this study faced family restrictions and obligations which resulted in some remaining veiled, or selectively unveiling depending on whom they were meeting. In a study conducted by Al Wazni (2015), American Muslim women referenced the Qur'an, rather than family obligation, for their decision to continue wearing hijab, while informants in the present study felt it was their families that obliged them to remain veiled. It should be noted that pressure to wear hijab came not only from family members within Australia. Fearing disapproval from family members overseas also led some women to conceal their unveiling when in contact with family members not in Australia.

Whether some informants wore hijab constantly or selectively, they considered the decision should be a personal one. Regardless of their decision, informants opposed family interference in this personal matter, and perceived the restrictions over hijab as a form of domestic violence. Setting rules about clothing enables men to exert control over the women in their families (Droogsma, 2007). Hence, informants' rejection of their husband's and/or other family member's demands over hijab might also reflect their resistance to patriarchal norms that control women's bodies, and show their critical reflection over being controlled by the patriarchal culture.

Family pressure to wear hijab was reinforced by the community and resulted in more control exerted over women. Some informants said that husbands forced them to wear the hijab when socialising with the Afghan community to avoid negative judgement and gossip. Therefore, these findings are inconsistent with some previous studies that found Muslim women regarded wearing hijab as useful in strengthening their ties with other Muslim community members, maintaining Muslim identity, facilitating relationships, enhancing freedom and protecting women (Alghafli et al., 2017; Droogsma, 2007; Jasperse et al., 2012).

Unveiling for Afghan women might also be a part of readjusting to a new country that offers more freedom to women. The informants' experiences showed that the process of taking off hijab was remarkably difficult because multiple factors were at play, depending on women's attitudes, family concerns and obligations, Afghan

community pressure and finally Australian society. Mainstream society played a crucial role in women's decision about the hijab, as some were concerned about the judgements and opinions of others in a non-Muslim majority country. This is not surprising, as previous studies found that Muslim women in Australia and other non-Muslim majority countries were concerned about facing xenophobia, discrimination and stigmatisation if they were identified as Muslims (Afshar, 2012; Eid, 2015; Fayyaz & Kamal, 2014; Grima, 2013; Hebbani & Wills, 2012; Jasperse et al., 2012; Keddie, 2018; Wagner et al., 2012). Hence, Muslim women are in a double bind, blamed for whichever decision they make (Carland, 2017).

Implications for Social Work Practice

Promotion of human rights, including respect for diversity, is a critical element of the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW, 2014) definition of social work. Rights-based social work actively challenges discrimination on the basis of difference (Mapp et al., 2019). In respect of women and hijab, both banning and forcing women to wear this attire are human rights issues (Syed, 2013) which may emerge in social work practice.

Social work practice which adopts an anti-oppressive stance understands power relations as oppressing some groups of people in society (Mullaly, 2010). Personal and cultural bases of oppression must be combined with a structural analysis of oppression, as oppression stems from unequal power through social divisions. This analysis can be done by social workers in collaboration with service users. Not only do anti-oppressive theorists explore multiple sources of structural oppression, but they are also concerned with the interaction between structural, personal, psychological, and cultural sources of oppression (Healy, 2014), from personal attitudes to cultural values that have been internalised via socialisation and in relation to the structure of society, such as patriarchy. As such, simply telling women to take off their veils is not culturally sensitive social work (Kakoti, 2012).

Oppression is assumed to be a dynamic, continuous and mutually reinforced social process (Mullaly, 2010). Oppressive factors for Afghan women are not parallel: their positions as both women and immigrants complicate and strengthen each other (Laing et al., 2013). Social workers' perspectives on hijab might further contribute to the oppression experienced by Afghan women. Indeed, it has been suggested that:

The Islamic practice of veiling, hijab, is one example where the perceptions of some social workers may be clouded by the prevailing meta-narrative with a resulting abrogation of the client's right to self-determination. Veiling is widely perceived in Western discourse as oppressing women, as a manifestation of enslavement. (Hodge, 2005, 168)

Consequently, if "the narrative that the hijab is symbolic of oppression and patriarchy has become so commonplace, it opens up the possibility for clinicians to enact bias and prejudicial behavior in the clinical encounter" (Al Wazni, 2015, 332).

Instead, it is crucial that social workers do not make assumptions about what hijab means to individual women (Schmidt, 2011). As with any issue, social workers should avoid asking service users questions which are of a prying nature and not assume hijab is the problem. General questions around how individuals see themselves and their issues at this time are no different to how social workers might work with any service users. A general question can be asked, as it was in the first author's research on the meaning of being an Afghan woman in Australia. Then, if hijab is raised, questions should be framed in neutral language, such as asking how women have made decisions about wearing hijab (Grima, 2013; Zimmerman, 2015).

Social workers can have misperceptions as to what it means to be Muslim and those who do not conform, for example those who do not wear hijab, are considered to have less allegiance to their faith (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Conversely, social workers who do not consider it to be a religious requirement, are less likely to support women's rights to wear hijab (Vickers, 2018). Either way, preconceived views about hijab can lead to "services that are offered on the basis of an essentialist conception of what it means to be Muslim" (Graham et al., 2010, 338) rather than those which meet the needs of specific service users. Furthermore, social work practice is not anti-oppressive if it requires diversity to be visible in order to be recognised (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Social workers need to be aware of the diversity of opinions toward Islam and differences as to how hijab is practiced by Muslim women. This can help to maintain a person-centred approach in their practice rather than labelling them simply as Muslim or according to their religious sect (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2017, 55).

Some wariness about religion by social workers is not necessarily a bad thing, given that religious beliefs of many persuasions have at times been used to oppress individuals and communities (Melendez & LaSala, 2006) and been integral to their experiences of disadvantage and discrimination (Vickers, 2018). Yet, despite not agreeing with veiling, social workers may find themselves advocating for the rights of individuals to veil (Hodge et al., 2017). Supporting women's choices to veil is consistent with an understanding that is central to the core tenets of social work practice:

Respecting people's human dignity means respecting their self-determination – appreciating, trusting, and empowering their ability to make decision for themselves. It also means viewing people as fully human, complete with strengths, capabilities, potential, and rights. (...) To respect people's human dignity, social workers must combat dehumanization, a product of stigmatization and scapegoating. Social workers can protect people's human dignity by promoting the rehumanization of people who have been stigmatized and discriminated against. (Mapp et al., 2019, 263)

Having the utmost respect for human dignity is at the crux of anti-oppressive practice, and unless there is a clear reason not to, for example an individual who is not legally competent to make decisions or is placing others at risk, their agency needs to be highly regarded. This is particularly difficult, as social workers might face a paradoxical situation, in that their values or beliefs contradict service users' values and choices (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2017, 59), for example, when agency results in a woman choosing what a social worker might regard as repulsive, such as

wearing hijab. Conversely, a social worker who has strong views about filial or marital duty might find it difficult to support women who choose not to wear hijab despite strong family pressure. In such situations it is the capacity to do what best respects the needs of service users, even if that is in direct contrast to what a social worker would do if she or he were in a similar situation, that determines whether or not the principles of anti-oppressive practice have been applied.

Social workers also need to promote a positive, dynamic and inclusive environment within organisations where they practice. This approach requires social workers' commitment to anti-oppressive practice, not only in their individual practice but also in collective actions to address an oppressive and discriminatory environment (Smith, 2020). Social work agencies that work with Muslim women may also need to develop an open discussion on social work values, and how to adapt their services to include Muslim women's values, rather than imposing social work knowledge (Graham et al., 2009). In many countries, "how to handle visible manifestations of religion, particularly the hijab" (Baker & Dinham, 2018, 26) is a critical issue for policy makers and social workers providing services to individuals and communities who are juggling with issues around welfare and social cohesion and sometimes also violent extremism. This requires not only a knowledge of different belief systems, but also a critical awareness of what informs one's own beliefs and practices (Crisp & Dinham, 2019; Smith, 2020). Although this chapter has focused on the wearing of hijab by Muslim women, the complexities identified around anti-oppressive means in practice potentially apply to social workers working in a much wider range of contexts in different countries and with service users from a wide range of religious beliefs or none at all.

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