# Women can choose to wear the burka – but can they choose not to?

Posted: Mon, 6th Aug 2012 by By Anne Marie Waters

"Exactly what choice does an 11-year-old girl have when her designated school uniform is a magician's black cloth that conceals her from the world and never brings her back?"

This was the question posed by Allison Pearson in her article 'We Too Should Ban the Burka' in the *Telegraph* last year. She was referring to an East Midlands school in which, from the age of 11, young girls are obliged to cover themselves entirely – including their face – with the Islamic niqab.

Never mind the practical nightmare this must present (how does anyone know who anyone is?), it puts paid to the idea that this garment is forever and always worn by "choice". It is utterly ludicrous to suggest that these young girls would all have chosen to wear this thing of their own volition. Why then isn't there a mass of 11 year olds insisting on covering their faces? Why just these girls? Why do girls in non-Islamist schools never choose to do this? It strikes me as odd that this doesn't happen if we are talking about genuine choice (just as it strikes me as odd that there isn't a single country in the world - that is not dominated by Islamism - where women spontaneously choose to cover themselves from head to toe).

The idea of 11 year olds being capable of making such life-altering choices is absurd, but the defence of choice in the matter of adults wearing the burka/niqab is both the most common and the most convincing argument put forward; therefore it must be tackled first hand.

There are a myriad of choices in life which are denied to us because they cause harm to others – either individually or socially. Bank robbery is a choice, pushing heroin on to children is a choice, but neither is sanctioned by law because they cause immense harm. Choice, in other words, is not unlimited – it is not a free-for-all.

Both in society and in law our choices are severely restricted, and rightly so. It is only fair then that the right to choose to cover one's face is restricted if this causes harm. So the question is - what harm does it cause?

Let's start with this: do we really think that forcing 11 year old girls to cover from head to toe, including their faces, causes them no psychological damage whatsoever?

Imagine what it must be like to be covered from top to bottom – unseen, invisible, denied an identity, just another black shape. Imagine being designated so dangerous and so heinous and so sinful that simply being seen will cause chaos and disorder. Imagine what it is like to be kept separate, different, away from public view.

It is hard enough for girls growing up. From birth, we are told that we are lesser… "run like a girl", "throw like a girl", "beaten by a girl" and so on. And not forgetting the all-encompassing "he" and "him" which is thrown about as if representative of the human being.

These are not minor issues, they can deeply affect the confidence of women and girls and we often have to fight them off to achieve our successes. If this is how difficult it can be for a western girl

who grows up in a society where she has legal and political equality, just imagine what it feels like for a Saudi girl, or a girl in a certain school in the English Midlands.

This cannot be glossed over. These are desperately important matters which can determine the health and well-being of half of the human population.

The issue of the covering of women extends far beyond a Midlands school however and far beyond theUnited Kingdom. It has a profound effect on the status and equality of women the world over. The heroic human rights campaigner Maryam Namazie puts it thus: "The veil is a tool for the suppression and oppression of women. It is meant to segregate. It is representative of how women are viewed: sub-human, 'deficient', 'inferior', without rights, and despised. Trapped in a mobile prison not to be heard from or seen".

On the topic of the burka, there is indeed a choice before us – whose side are we on? Are we on the side of the women in Saudi Arabia protesting for their rights? Or the theocratic misogynists standing in their way?

Are we on the side of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan risking their lives to educate girls? Or are we on the side of the misogynists who want women imprisoned for life behind blackened windows and ignorant and fearful of the world around them? Are we on the side of the Iranian women fighting religious police in Tehran? Or the violent thugs beating these women for not being correctly veiled?

The point is, the burka represents things that we claim to oppose when we speak about women's equality. It runs counter to democratic values and norms because it designates women a different and separate existence. It does so because it sends women to the back of the bus. Covers us, excludes us, and forces us to live half a life. Is this not harm? Should the choice to cause this harm therefore not be restricted?

There are other ills caused by the covering of the face; if I raise the issue of social cohesion or security, I will again be met with a defence of 'choice'. The covering of the face separates people and keeps them from mainstream society. It prevents women who wear it from taking on certain roles, it limits their freedom by severely curtailing their employment prospects – keeping them dependent and isolated. It ghettoises and separates Muslims from non-Muslims and sows the seeds for generations of disconnect and distrust. Should we have a choice to promote and maintain such a direction?

The security argument is dismissed as right-wing lunacy, but it is a real concern – why shouldn't it be? Why is an exception made in situations and places where face covering would otherwise simply not be permitted on security grounds - such as in a bank or a shop? This exception compounds the separation – "you're different", "nobody else can do it but you can…because you're different". Isn't this harm?

I've heard it argued – with a straight face – that if we ban the burka then women will be imprisoned in their homes; their husband won't allow them outside. Is this where we are? A woman either covers entirely or stays home? There is no other option? If, as is argued, husbands force their wives to stay at home, then there is a thing called 'false imprisonment' and these husbands should be prosecuted for it.

It is difficult for me to make these arguments – I find myself in unfamiliar territory. I believe strongly in freedom of conscience and a person's right to live as they please. But I simply cannot

countenance the harm that these garments cause – both to society and to individual women and girls. I cannot be comfortable with something that separates women and girls and denies us a face.

I am utterly loathe to add to the feeling of isolation that Muslims are no doubt feeling across the western world, but the truth is that not all Muslims agree with wearing of the burka, and many, many Muslim women are desperate not to wear it – what about them? When we talk about banning the burka, why is our primary concern always for the women who want to wear it, and never for the women who don't?

The number of women wearing the burka and niqab has exploded in Britain in recent decades. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown has described this as follows: "It started 20 years ago with the hijab, donned then as a defiant symbol of identity, now a conscript's uniform. Then came the jilbab, the cloak, fought over in courts when schoolgirls were manipulated into claiming it as an essential Islamic garment."

We must consider therefore what the future will bring. It could be argued that banning this garment will reduce the numbers wearing it – both now and the future - and that is a result I would welcome. If we cannot ban the burka for the women who desperately want to rid themselves of it, or in solidarity with women the world over who risk their lives to fight against this sartorial prison, perhaps then we can do it for their daughters?

In her wonderful book 'My Forbidden Face', Latifa – a young Afghan girl -wrote:

> "In order to look behind me, I have to turn around completely. I can feel the rustle of my own breath inside the garment. I'm hot. My feet get tangled up in the material. I'll never be able to wear this. I now understand the stiff robot-like walk of the 'bottle women', their unflinching look directly in front of them or fixed rigidly on any unsuspected obstacle. I now know why they hesitate for so long before crossing the street, why it takes them an eternity to walk upstairs. These phantoms that now roam the streets of Kabul have a terrible time avoiding bicycles, buses and carts. It's even worse trying to run away from the Taliban. This is not a garment. It is a mobile prison."

Do we stand with Latifa and oppose the burka? That is the real choice that we all need to make.

**N/A**

Anne Marie Waters was a member of the NSS. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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