

# The niqab in schools: An argument for prohibition

Posted: Thu, 4th Feb 2016 by [Sadikur Rahman](#)

*Sadikur Rahman argues that the case for banning full face veils in schools extends far beyond whether or not they present a barrier to learning.*

The niqab, or full-face veil, is once again in the news after the chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, told inspectors in England that they can fail schools for allowing face veils if they are proving to be a "barrier to learning". But the Government continues to take the view that when it comes to the niqab and religious head dress in general, it is best left to the individual school to decide.

A person is largely free to wear whatever they want in public, (except in certain public buildings), or in private. So I do not make an argument for banning the niqab in public.

There is however a very strong argument for the prohibition of the niqab, (the full face veil), from primary and secondary schools – and not only on communication grounds.

Although young women can choose to wear the niqab or hijab for many reasons, it cannot be denied that the primary reason is that they believe their religion requires it of them.

Clearly there are differences between various sects, traditions and the four schools of Sunni law, although much less than some might wish. It is generally accepted that hair, arms and legs should be covered with a gown which does not show the shape of the body, although there is disagreement about whether the face needs to be covered. Muslim reformers tend to argue that even hair covering is not required at all on the basis that the initial reason for the veil or, even segregation, was because it was not safe to be a Muslim woman amongst enemies. So given that this reasoning no longer applies, these items of dress are not required.

Whether by choice or the insistence of parents, any argument that seeks to prohibit the niqab will have to contend with the fact that it will be a potential breach of the right to religious freedom and freedom of expression under the Human Rights Act and the European Convention. This is a qualified right however, and such breaches can be allowed as long as any measures are proportionate, according to law and are in order to pursue a legitimate aim: The legitimate aim in this case being the protection of children.

One need only carry out a cursory Google search or do a little reading on whether the hijab or niqab is required for Muslim women to find a plethora of websites and advice saying that, yes, the hijab at least is a mandatory requirement although the niqab is not, and providing theological justifications as to why Allah requires women to cover their bodies in various ways. It is these justifications that should be of particular concern to schools, because they represent a very harmful image of women. (See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) from 'Islamic FAQ' and 'Islamic Awareness'). For a more 'modern' interpretation, and claims that the niqab or hijab empowers women see [here](#) from 'Islamic Insights'.

But the opinion of the person wearing the veil or the Muslim scholar as to what these verses and hadiths mean does not mean that the rest of us have suspend our own logic or accept these arguments without scrutiny, particularly when it comes to protecting children.

A fair and objective reading of these verses and websites should have any self-respecting feminist or anyone interested in equality between men and women reaching for their placards and pens. It seems to me every verse and hadith represents the subjugation of women to a lesser status. The discussions relate to injunctions on *women* to dress in a certain way – the only directive to men is the fairly unobtrusive demand "to lower their gaze", whereas for women there are a plethora of injunctions and commands. At its most basic the requirements of these modesty codes concern only women and so are *prima facie* an unequal state of affairs; as men are not required to cover their hair - much less their entire body.

It is also clear that the main reason for these 'modesty' codes is so as not rouse the sexual interest or lust of men. Let's be clear what this means – women have to cover up so that men can avoid committing the sin of not lowering their gaze when a pretty woman walks past. It of course begs the question; if men were so dangerous and could not control their lust, perhaps it should be men who stay at home rather than restrict the freedom of women.

It also seems, contrary to those Muslims who think that somehow by covering up women will ensure men appreciate their other qualities rather than seeing them purely as a sexual object that this is exactly what modesty codes are doing.

The idea that a woman has to cover her "awrah" i.e. those parts of her body that are considered intimate, private and sexual parts (which for all schools of law extends to all parts of a woman's body except the hands and face and for some the face as well) is in fact turning a woman's whole body into a sexual object which must be hidden. Moreover it must be hidden in public not for any real reason that benefits a woman but so that a man is not tempted to look at a pretty woman. There are often complaints that young children are sexualised too early through advertising, revealing clothes or free contraception, but this is doing exactly the same. The niqab/hijab is explicitly sexualising young children by saying that if their bodies are not covered up then they will automatically arouse the sexual interest of men. The complete misogyny is summed up by this quote from 'Islamic Awareness':

*"As for the controversial part of the issue, we should think of it as a sign of Allah's mercy that He left some things open, so that there will be no hardship for people, and that they can make use of such things according to their own benefit. For example, if a woman is so beautiful to the extent that she attracts men's attention and her beauty tempts them, she would cover her face, as an aspect of preventing harm, even if it is agreed that niqab is not obligatory. On the other hand, some women may have some breathing or skin problems that they do not tolerate wearing face cover. Here, we realize that the difference of opinion in relation to niqab is really an aspect of Allah's mercy".*

The hadiths and commentary make clear that for a woman to gain respect she must be covered up. Many reformers and young Muslim feminists see this as their tool of empowerment. By adhering to these prohibitions they argue that they have somehow gained their self-respect, forcing men to consider their brains over beauty or looks, and so in some way to treat them as an equal. The irony of course is that they have had to completely restrict their personal freedom in order to gain that 'respect'. As old school feminists might have said, if a woman has to change her behaviour in order to gain respect - that's no respect at all. The irony seems lost on all and is no different from the Mayor of Cologne recently suggesting that women need to change their behaviour to stop the attacks.

Finally, it can be seen that the primary focus of modesty codes, and face veils, their most explicit manifestation, is female sexuality. To be blunt, it's all about sex, from the need to cover a woman's 'sexual parts' in order to avoid lustful gazes, to having to cover up to gain respect so that men don't think of women as a sex object.

I do not doubt that many reforming Muslims do not see it in this way and eloquently and vehemently argue that covering is not required or if it was, it was only initially instituted for security or a safety reasons which no longer apply. However, it cannot be denied that the overwhelming majority of Muslim interpretation is of the former variety and some go so far as to insist on the niqab.

So whether one likes it or not when someone chooses to wear the hijab or niqab and for whatever immediate reason, one is nevertheless buying into these deeply discriminatory, sexist and misogynistic views.

Ultimately, given the values that lie behind the niqab and the hijab alike, are these really the ideas schools should be endorsing or allowing?

The rationale behind the niqab and the hijab is rooted in the same modesty code. But the niqab is a far greater obstacle to integration, communication and learning, and a starker manifestation of the misogyny that underlies these religious practices.

We are constantly being told that young women's self-esteem is very low, but at the same time we are allowing very young children to come to school wearing an item of clothing that represents at best the idea that to be safe or gain respect from men they must cover up and worst it is a misogynistic and sexist practice. These codes must be challenged, but the case against allowing the niqab in schools is particularly compelling.

I believe there is a very strong argument based on child protection concerns to insist that the niqab should not be allowed at all in schools, including in faith schools, and the Government should legislate on this rather than leave it to individual schools.

**See also:** [Position statement on the burka/niqab](#)

*Sadikur Rahman is on the NSS council. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and are not necessarily the views of the NSS.*

## **Sadikur Rahman**

Sadikur Rahman is a member of the National Secular Society's Council and the coordinator of the Secular Legal Forum. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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