

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الهيئة الإسلامية في أيرلندا

Islamic Foundation of Ireland

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Wearing of Islamic Head Cover (Hijab) in Irish Schools

(A submission to the Minister for Integration as part of his consultation process on the issue)

The Muslim community in Ireland has been watching with unease the recent media controversy that has emerged with regard to the wearing of Islamic head cover by Muslim girls in Irish schools. The debate on the issue has been typified by misunderstanding, myth and sensationalism. Opinions on Islam and its practice have been expressed by those who are unqualified to do so. Media pundits have expressed views on the wearing of Hijab without consulting any mainstream Islamic authority.

Before looking at the issues around Hijab in schools it is important to be aware of two basic points.

1- The current controversy on Hijab in schools has to a large extent been created and fuelled by the media. There has been no flood of enquiries or complaints to the Department of Education and Science with regard to Hijab and most schools with Muslim girls have taken on a policy of 'reasonable accommodation' i.e. allowing girls to wear the Hijab within the school guidelines. The media have inflated the issue linking it to topics such as the treatment of women in other countries, immigration etc.

2- Some commentators on Hijab have sought to link the Hijab in school issue with that of immigration and assimilation. One politician was reported to have said regarding Muslims: "Nobody is formally asking them to come here. In the interests of integration and assimilation they should embrace our culture."

Of the approx 32,000 Muslims in Ireland almost one third (31%) are Irish citizens. Many, especially, of school age, have been born here and are often of native Irish descent.

The Muslim community has been resident in Ireland since the 1950's and is one of the most integrated communities in Ireland. These Irish citizens are entitled to the same rights and treatment as all other Irish citizens in regard to religious belief and practice. For generations Irish children both Catholic and non Catholic have been taught in schools full of religious symbols by veiled nuns. In a changing Ireland, where diversity in

'Irishness' is the norm are some citizens now to be differentiated from others.

The Issues

The Hijab or head cover worn by Muslim women is an obligatory part of Islamic practice for women. It is based on the Quranic verse: "Say to the believing women that they should not display their adornment save such as is outward; and that they should draw their head scarves over their bosoms ..." (Qur'an chapter 24-31.)

This is also supported by the saying of the Prophet Mohammed: "When a woman reaches puberty, it is not lawful that any part of her body be seen, except this and this" - and then he pointed to his face and the palms of his hands.

The opinion that wearing the Hijab is an obligation upon Muslim women (when they are in the presence of adult men who are not members of their immediate families) is upheld by the vast majority of Muslim scholars throughout the Islamic world and is practiced by hundreds of millions Muslim women. It is not a symbolic act as the Hijab has a function which is to cover the head, neck and bosom. It is not a cultural practice but transcends many cultures.

A woman is obliged to wear Hijab after puberty (at the onset of menstruation) as she is then in religious terms considered an adult. Younger girls may wear it even though it may not be obligatory for them, getting used to wearing Hijab and desiring to be like their mothers, sisters etc.

Although some Muslim women may chose not to wear Hijab this does not obviate the religious ruling, many people of all religions choose not to practice but this does not remove or make obsolete those religious obligations

Muslim girls are currently wearing Hijab in a growing number of post primary schools. Boards of Management have accommodated this practice within the guidelines of the schools and for the main part have treated the issue with respect and accommodation.

Health and safety is rightly quoted with regard to Hijab, especially in regard to laboratory work, home economics and physical education. It is possible to wear a neat, close fitting head cover that would not be flapping or flowing in such situations. Many schools now wear lab coats that can be put on over scarves and further reduce health and safety worries. The Islamic community may well have a role in helping to select or chose styles of Hijab suitable for school wear.

It should be remembered that there are a large number of Muslim female doctors and laboratory technicians in Ireland and elsewhere in the Western world who wear Hijab without posing any health or safety threat, or compromising their ability to do the job.

It should also be noted that the Under 13 All Ireland Handball Champions are the girls of the Muslim National School, many of whose members wear Hijab when playing without any ill effect.

The media have also raised the issue of the Niqab or face veil in schools. There is no known record of this ever being raised in a school. In education pupils need to maintain communication between themselves and their teachers and peers. The wearing of a face

veil would not facilitate this communication and so there is a strong argument that this would not be viable within schools.

The 'Hijab debate' has opened many other debates; it is these we need to address not Hijab in schools. What is being Irish, how is that changing? All citizens no matter their ethnicity or religion should be entitled to the same expression of their beliefs. We have seen the road taken by some of our European neighbours where all religious symbols have been removed from schools and the rich tapestry of difference has been lost. To understand each other we need tolerance and education not to hide away our differences in some bland cover. To regulate against one group in society would be discriminatory.

It is essential that positive account is taken of the faith dimension of pupils in education and schooling. Faith should be seen as an asset to addressing constructively many of the issues that young people face today, including educational failure, disaffection, drugs, crime etc.

Reflecting Islamic heritage and practice in a positive light encourages self esteem in young Muslim women and makes them feel they are part of an institution that values their heritage. They will then see themselves as an integral part of school life and of wider society and not on the margins of society or separate. For the wearing of the Hijab to be seen as something negative or to be banned in schools only causes further alienation and separation.

Most post primary Muslim girls have had a good experience in post primary education. Their beliefs have been respected and they have become active parts of their school communities. Peers have come to know them as themselves rather than defined by what they wear. This is the real way forward to integration and diversity in society.

The Islamic Foundation of Ireland.
03 July 2008.