

WOMEN & ISLAM

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◆ The 2018 midterm Congressional election was historic for several reasons, among them that a record number of women, including the youngest woman ever, were elected to the U.S. Congress. In addition, two of the newly elected legislators, Palestinian American Rashida Tlaib from Michigan and Ilhan Omar, a Somali American politician from Minnesota, won seats in their respective districts to become the first Muslim women elected to serve in the House of Representatives. For many Americans, Tlaib's and Omar's rise to national prominence represented a shift in the types of narratives about Muslim women that have become common across much of the news media and other public conversations about who Muslim women are and what their lives are like.

As with many minoritized communities, misconceptions about Muslims are widespread, and stereotypes about Muslim women are particularly persistent. News stories about social challenges that some Muslim women face frequently blame Islam as a belief system, and fictional accounts in literature, movies, and television that rely on the idea that Muslim women are especially vulnerable to sexism and gender oppression remain common. All of this serves to reinforce the misconceptions held by the many people who are exposed to them. The reality is, of course, much more complex. With roughly a billion Muslims around the world, in practically every country on Earth, speaking a variety of languages, from an array of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and with widely varying levels of educational opportunities, economic resources, political environments, and personal circumstances, generalizations about "Muslim women" are often misleading.

One of the most controversial and widely misunderstood aspects of Muslim women's lives is outward dress. For many Muslims, regardless of gender, an emphasis on modesty as a religious and cultural value is common, and is often reflected in clothing that covers much of the body when in public and in the company of those outside of one's immediate family. Some Muslim women choose to wear a hijab, or headscarf, along with loose-fitting outer clothing as an expression of this ideal. Other women wear coverings over all or most of their faces. Many Muslim women, however, do not cover in this fashion. All of these practices represent something of the collective experience of women in Islam.

While much of the public discourse about Muslim women centers around the issue of what they wear, attire is by far not the only, or even the most important, aspect of their lives. Like other women around the world, Muslim women go to school and work, tend to their families, participate in the political process at all levels (a number of Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Senegal, and Mali, have had female heads of state), create art, music, and poetry, play sports, and advocate for their communities. And the various types of challenges faced by women around the world affect Muslim women too:

Sexism and misogyny at the interpersonal and institutional levels, vulnerability to violence, discrimination, and economic exploitation continue to shape the lives of many Muslim women. Some of these challenges are compounded precisely because of their identities and religious practice: Generalized fear and misunderstanding of Muslims often affect Muslim women in unique ways, especially those who wear hijab or are easily identifiable. Racial and religious profiling in U.S. airports and restrictions or bans on Muslim women's dress in public spaces (for example, the prohibition of hijab in schools in France) are all examples of the ways that anti-Muslim prejudice can specifically affect women.

In spite of these difficulties, Muslim women continue to expand the boundaries of what is often commonly understood to be possible for women of their faith. Politicians such as Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib are examples of this, as are widely recognized public figures who have innovated in their respective fields. Human rights activist and educator Betty Shabazz and jazz singer Dakota Staton were pioneers in the 1950s, and there are numerous other examples in the decades that followed. For example, in 1997, African American Zakia Mahasa became the first Muslim woman to preside as judge over a U.S. courtroom. Iranian American engineer Anousheh Ansari became the first Muslim woman in space in 2006. In her capacity as longtime aide to Hillary Clinton, Huma Abedin served in a variety of roles, including deputy chief of staff at the State Department and vice chairwoman of Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. The everyday contributions of less famous women are of no lesser importance: The wide range of experiences of academics, physicians, theologians, community organizers, bus drivers, domestic workers, and housewives are representative of what it means to be a Muslim woman.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Donna Auston is an anthropologist, writer, and public intellectual whose body of work focuses on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, protest and social movements, media representation, and Islam in America. When these essays were written in 2019, she was completing her dissertation, an ethnography of Black Muslim activism and spiritual protest in the Black Lives Matter era, at Rutgers University.