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Veil Debate in Britain Is Also Divisive for Muslims

By Kevin Sullivan and Karla Adam
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LONDON, Oct. 20 -- Wearing a Muslim veil revealing only her chestnut eyes, Maheesa Razia grabbed two small bundles of coriander and handed them to a vegetable vendor at the Whitechapel Street Market in east London.

She passed the man a coin and walked off, quietly completing the most mundane of daily tasks while wearing a garment -- the full-face veil, or *niqab* -- that has caused a raging debate about how well Britain's nearly 2 million Muslims are integrating into society.

"I feel comfortable wearing the niqab here; there was zero awkwardness," Razia, 24, said through the flowing fabric of her veil.

After she walked away, the vendor, Mohammad Dehbourzorgi, a Muslim who moved to Britain 22 years ago, sounded almost contemptuous. He said he agreed with Jack Straw, a top official in Prime Minister Tony Blair's government and leader of the House of Commons, who started the controversy this month by complaining that veils create distance between individuals and cultures.

"Jack Straw has a point," said Dehbourzorgi, who was wearing blue jeans. "If you come to England, then try to be English."

The veil debate has become part of a larger discussion in Britain about Muslims and religious tolerance, free expression, human rights, prejudice and security. These issues have dominated public discourse since the July 2005 bombings on the London public transportation system and a plot uncovered in August this year that allegedly involved blowing up transatlantic jetliners. In both cases, Britons were alarmed to discover that the men who allegedly committed or contemplated mass murder were young Muslim men who had been raised in Britain.

While the veil issue has exacerbated tensions between non-Muslims and Muslims, it has also sparked passionate reactions within Muslim communities. Some Muslim leaders have accused Straw, Blair -- who called veils a "mark of separation" -- and others of demonizing Muslims, but others have said they have raised an important issue that has no clear consensus among Muslims.

"It's a valid discussion for the times in which we live," said Humera Khan of the An-Nisa Society, a Muslim social welfare organization run by women. "But we shouldn't be seen as some crazy, weird people."

Khan said the niqab is worn by "a tiny minority" of British Muslim women. An increasing number of young women have started wearing it, she said, as an "assertion of religious identity" in a climate of "irrational paranoia" about Muslims since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

"The debate has become more political than religious," said Khan, who wears a head scarf that does not cover her face. She said Muslims have discussed the veil for hundreds of years and that the issue periodically pops into Western consciousness, often when raised by non-Muslim politicians. "There is historical Islamophobic line of thought about women in veils," she said. "It doesn't tell you anything about us. It tells you more about the people who are raising the issue."

Many Britons have praised Straw for bringing up a delicate issue in a reasonable way. But Fareena Alam, editor of Q-News, a Muslim magazine, said she believed that Straw's comments were a cynical attempt to boost his own political fortunes and that his calls for debate were "complete rubbish, irritating and patronizing." She said the controversy had driven more Muslim women to start wearing the niqab in "rebellion."

Alam said the situation has stifled serious and nuanced debate about the issue, as Muslims who believe that their religion is under attack from outsiders instinctively side with Muslim women who wear veils. She said she recently talked to two traditional Islamic scholars who said the full-face veil was "out of place in the West" and a "barrier to integration."

"They are not saying anything different from Jack Straw," said Alam, who does not wear a niqab. "But it has to come from the right place. What Jack Straw said really rubbed people the wrong way. They are saying, 'I'm going to wear this because you don't want me to.' "

The veil issue has also divided women's rights advocates, Muslim and non-Muslim. Some argue that wearing the veil is simply a woman's choice, whether a statement of quiet religious observance or a battle cry for political independence, and should not be questioned by white male government officials. But others call veils a sad symbol of oppression and subservience.

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The Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie, whose book "The Satanic Verses" once led to death threats against him by Islamic clerics, recently said veils were "a way of taking power away from women." Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell said veils represent "women's subjugation."

But Alam called such comments "outdated." While a small number of women are compelled to wear veils by men in their family, she said, most do it for their own reasons: "They have reclaimed the veil and redefined it for themselves."

At the Whitechapel market, where back-to-back stalls offer practically everything from fabrics to phone cards and fennel, Razia, a married mother of two who was born in Britain, said she started wearing the niqab when she was 13. She was inspired by a Bangladeshi Islamic scholar, she said, and listened to tapes of his sermons and saw him speak when he came to the East London Mosque.

"The face is the main thing about a person," she said. "If you expose it, others will judge whether you are pretty or not. It just makes sense according to my religion to wear it."

Razia said her mother had never worn the niqab but "became so inspired by me she started to wear it, too."

Razia, who studies math at Tower Hamlets College in east London, said a teacher there asked her to remove the veil "so we could better communicate." Now, Razia removes the veil during class, but "the moment I leave the classroom, I put it back on again," she said.

At home, she wears Western clothing. "I don't do it outside because there is no need to show the world your body," she said. "You can wear whatever at home in front of your husband. This is my way."

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