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My Security Blanket

As we all know, people have a habit of saying “be true to yourself”. But the moment I decided to wear my hijab that energy disappeared and instead doubt lingers in the air. A woman’s hijab which is a sign of faith becomes a threat, or a reason for misjudgment. Some people believe that women who wear the hijab are oppressed, do not have control over their decisions, and have few goals in life. Some imagine hijabi women trapped in basements, and only being allowed up to cook and clean with no say in anything. Their perception of us translates into a Hollywood dystopian film. But none of this is true at all. I wear the hijab to preserve my religion, and to be proud of myself as an individual. It does not interfere with my goals or successes but rather enhances them. It’s also a mirror to reflect on who I am, what I stand for, and how far I’ve come, not something that sets me back. That’s why my outlook is significant. One misconception is that women are forced to wear a hijab from childhood and do not have a say. However, my experience proves otherwise. Wearing the hijab allows me to uphold my faith by covering my body and remaining chaste, which I feel is the moral thing to do. I began wearing the hijab when I was in the third grade at the age of eight years old. I believed in the powerful and successful, women around me, mainly my mother who would put it on without shame. But as I entered adulthood, I began to experience problems and pressures, and I removed it in my eighth grade. Even though I wanted to look like my mom and the women around me, my peers didn’t wear the

hijab, and I often felt a little left out. But during swimming class, when I had to take it off, everyone would shower me with compliments, they would then tell me I looked better without the hijab and that's when the insecurities began. When I reached my junior year of high school, I had fully embraced it. I decided to wear it again with pride and actively and productively pushing it forth. It was no longer considered as an accessory but a symbol of who I am and what I can be. My hijab is not something that makes me oppressed, rather, it is something that I wear and which I have chosen of my own free will because of my faith.

One more stereotype that people still have is that Muslim women who wear hijab are forbidden to work or get an education mainly college education. But when it comes to seeking knowledge, Islam encourages it for both men and women. "Seek knowledge" is Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in fact the Holy Quran says, "and so, to scatter knowledge among the people is an obligation for every Muslim". This hadith teaches that education is mandatory for each and every person and does not matter whether the person is male or female. The hijab has also never been an obstacle to education in my life. Rather, it has encouraged me to try to not obey to such stereotypical behaviors and gender roles. My family knows how important education is and has always supported me throughout my years of schooling. I attended an alternative school during my senior year, as I fell behind on credits because of COVID. If it weren't for my family pushing me and reminding me to have faith that I could do it, I wouldn't be in college right now. I'm seeking knowledge for my own growth and to fulfill my goals and dreams of becoming a pediatric sonographer. My intention here is to convey the message that the Muslim women can work and shine in any field of their choice. But I have faced discrimination and damage in some ways but have transformed it into an opportunity to

appreciate my faith and educate others. Therefore, the length of my clothing or the scarf on my head should not be used as an indication of my capabilities or potential.

In my interactions with the hijabi women surrounding me today, I have seen that they are successful and have thrived in different areas of life. So do decent looking doctors, engineers, lawyers and businesswomen wear the hijab with pride while earning their living. I say this social representation shows that intelligence or capability is not measured by the clothes we wear. Muslim women should also be given an environment where they are welcomed in the workplaces rather than discriminated against just because they wear a hijab. But Universities and Colleges are doing better by having prayer rooms to accommodate us. While employers should not judge the abilities of people of applicants for employment on their appearance. Regardless of the desire of any woman to wear a hijab, she should be given equal chances just like any other person. Another stereotype is that women who wear hijab are Islamic extremists. Looking back on media representations and discourses, it is possible that most of them present a hijab wearing Muslim woman as an oppressed woman, or even a terrorist. These false misconceptions create fear and enhance Islamophobia, discriminating against women wearing the hijab. The hijab cannot be associated with extreme behaviors. It is an individual and spiritual decision, which depends on every individual. Unfortunately, many people are still afraid of hijabis, due to ignorance the negative portrayals by the media. Many times, I have found myself being judged by other people who even assume that I am unfriendly because of the hijab that I wear. But I also think that stems a bit from my somewhat reserved personality and the fact that I have a natural resting face. Most people say I'm very bubbly once they start talking to me. One day, a very close friend of mine, who also wears the hijab, experienced a traumatic night at the airport. During a

security check, she was unfairly targeted and was put through an invasive search only because of how she looked. This kind of discrimination is unacceptable. Religious outfit should not be used as a reason to judge or even mistreat someone. There needs to be awareness to change the perceptions that individuals have on these issues. Wearing of the hijab should not make a woman a suspect or an outcast in society. Instead of avoiding and being suspicious of hijabi women, people should try to understand them and their experiences.

Many misconceptions about the hijab stem from ignorance or a lack of exposure to different perspectives. Ignorance is the biggest enemy in general, and specifically when people fear something they do not comprehend. But people holding these ideas need to be educated to change their mind and break the stereotype. I have had discussions with classmates who had some other misunderstandings about the hijab. Afterwards they were able to change their view of my situation and experiences. This is a clear example of how speaking up can help get rid of misconceptions that exist between different people. I personally have had misconceptions about others before, especially when I was younger and didn't know any better. For example, I used to believe that Africa was completely poor, that many people there were food-deprived, and that they were rude all based on what I had seen in the media. While that may be true in some places to an extent, once I visited Africa, I realized how wrong those assumptions were. Not all of Africa is in poverty in fact, it's a beautiful continent with places that look even better than some areas in America. And the people there were incredibly kind, welcoming you like family. That experience made me realize that just as people might have misconceptions about me because I wear the hijab, I too have developed certain assumptions about others that weren't fair or accurate. So, it is important that people set their time aside to just listen, to understand the beliefs

and events in other people's lives. It was nice seeing others try and hear, comprehend, and empathize.

But as my experience indicates, all these assumptions and misconceptions are false. I began wearing it in third grade, removed it in the middle school, and then restarted wearing it in high school. This journey made me understand that the hijab is much more than headscarf, it represents faith, respect for the body, and power. Women should not be stereotyped and should not be judged based on physical appearance. It also means women who choose to wear the hijab are not less intelligent, any less determined, or less capable than any other woman. I will continue to attempt at deconstructing the negative representations of the Hijab. If I had a daughter one day, I'd want to talk to her about the hijab with love and patience. I'd tell her about my journey, and how it all started by wanting to look and be just like my mom. I'd explain that the hijab is a symbol of faith and modesty. It's not something that's forced because it became a part of who I am. Just like I was given the choice, the same will go for her. Society can only progress if people will at least pay attention to the key pieces that make a society great and that is to respect diversity. Minorities need to be allowed to showcase their faith without feeling that they will be looked down upon or discriminated against. One should never judge a book by its cover, so one should not judge a person by the choice of covering his or her head especially that little piece of fabric known as the hijab. It is far beyond what most people consider as cloth and accessory it is faith, strength, and identity. And I truly consider it as my security blanket.