Muslims’ Veils Test Limits of Britain’s Tolerance



Hazel Thompson for The New York Times

A young British Muslim woman who would only allow her last name, al-Shaikh, to be printed, wears a full-face veil. "It's an act of faith," she said. More Photos > Top of Form

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LONDON, June 16 — Increasingly, Muslim women in [Britain](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/unitedkingdom/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) take their children to school and run errands covered head to toe in flowing black gowns that allow only a slit for their eyes. On a Sunday afternoon in Hyde Park, groups of black-clad Muslim women relaxed on the green baize lawn among the in-line skaters and badminton players.

[Skip to next paragraph](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/22/world/europe/22veil.htm?pagewanted=all" \l "secondParagraph)Their appearance, like little else, has unnerved other Britons, testing the limits of tolerance here and fueling the debate over the role of Muslims in British life.

Many veiled women say they are targets of abuse. Meanwhile, there are growing efforts to place legal curbs on the full-face Muslim veil, known as the niqab.

There have been numerous examples in the past year. A lawyer dressed in a niqab was told by an [immigration](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/i/immigration_and_refugees/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) judge that she could not represent a client because, he said, he could not hear her. A teacher wearing a niqab was dismissed from her school. A student who was barred from wearing a niqab took her case to the courts, and lost. In reaction, the British educational authorities are proposing a ban on the niqab in schools altogether.

A leading Labor Party politician, [Jack Straw](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/jack_straw/index.html?inline=nyt-per), scolded women last year for coming to see him in his district office in the niqab. Prime Minister [Tony Blair](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/tony_blair/index.html?inline=nyt-per) has called the niqab a “mark of separation.”

David Sexton, a columnist for The Evening Standard, wrote recently that the niqab was an affront and that Britain had been “too deferential.”

“It says that all men are such brutes that if exposed to any more normally clothed women, they cannot be trusted to behave — and that all women who dress any more scantily like that are indecent,” Mr. Sexton wrote. “It’s abusive, a walking rejection of all our freedoms.”

Although the number of women wearing the niqab has increased in the past several years, only a tiny percentage of women among Britain’s two million Muslims cover themselves completely. It is impossible to say how many exactly.

Some who wear the niqab, particularly younger women who have taken it up recently, concede that it is a frontal expression of Islamic identity, which they have embraced since Sept. 11, 2001, as a form of rebellion against the policies of the Blair government in Iraq, and at home.

“For me it is not just a piece of clothing, it’s an act of faith, it’s solidarity,” said a 24-year-old program scheduler at a broadcasting company in London, who would allow only her last name, al-Shaikh, to be printed, saying she wanted to protect her privacy. “9/11 was a wake-up call for young Muslims,” she said.

At times she receives rude comments, including, Ms. Shaikh said, from a woman at her workplace who told her she had no right to be there. Ms. Shaikh says she plans to file a complaint.

When she is on the street, she often answers back. “A few weeks ago, a lady said, ‘I think you look crazy.’ I said, ‘How dare you go around telling people how to dress,’ and walked off. Sometimes I feel I have to reply. Islam does teach you that you must defend your religion.”

She started experimenting with the niqab at Brunel University in West London, a campus of intense Islamic activism. She hesitated at first because her mother saw it as a “form of extremism, which is understandable,” she said, adding that her mother has since come around.

Other Muslims find the practice objectionable, a step backward for a group that is under pressure after the terrorist attack on London’s transit system in July 2005.

“After the July 7 attacks, this is not the time to be antagonizing Britain by presenting Muslims as something sinister,” said Imran Ahmad, the author of “Unimagined,” an autobiography about growing up Muslim in Britain, and the leader of British Muslims for Secular Democracy. “The veil is so steeped in subjugation, I find it so offensive someone would want to create such barriers. It’s retrograde.”

Since South Asians started coming to Britain in large numbers in the 1960s, a small group of usually older, undereducated women have worn the niqab. It was most often seen as a sign of subjugation.

Many more Muslim women wear the head scarf, called the hijab, covering all or some of their hair. Unlike in France, Turkey and Tunisia, where students in state schools and civil servants are banned from covering their hair, in Britain, Muslim women can wear the head scarf, and indeed the niqab, almost anywhere, for now.

But that tolerance is slowly eroding. Even some who wear the niqab, like Faatema Mayata, a 24-year-old psychology and religious studies teacher, agreed there were limits.

“How can you teach when you are covering your face?” she said, sitting with a cup of tea in her living room in Blackburn, a northern English town, her niqab tucked away because she was within the confines of her home.

She has worn the niqab since she was 12, when she was sent by her parents to an all-girl boarding school. The niqab was not, as many Britons seemed to think, a sign of extremism, she said.

She condemned Britain’s involvement in Iraq, and she described the departure of Mr. Blair at the end of this month as “good riddance of bad rubbish.” But, she added, “there are many Muslims like this sitting at home having tea, and not taking any interest in jihad.”

The niqab, to her, is about identity. “If I dressed in a Western way I could be a Hindu, I could be anything,” she said. “This way I feel comfortable in my identity as a Muslim woman.”

No one else in her family wears the niqab. Her husband, Ibrahim Boodi, a social worker, was indifferent, she said. “If I took it off today, he wouldn’t care.”

She drives her old Alfa Romeo to the supermarket, and other drivers take no exception, she said. But when she is walking she is often stopped, she said. “People ask, ‘Why do you wear that?’ A lot of people assume I’m oppressed, that I don’t speak English. I don’t care. I’ve got a brain.”

Some British commentators have complained that mosques encourage women to wear the niqab, a practice they have said should be stopped.

At the East London Mosque, one of the largest mosques in the capital, the chief imam, Abdul Qayyum, studied in Saudi Arabia and is trained in the Wahhabi school of Islam. The community relations officer at the mosque, Ehsan Abdullah Hannan, said the imam’s daughter wore the niqab.

At Friday Prayer recently, the women were crowded into a small windowless room upstairs, away from the main hall for the men.

A handful of young women wore the niqab, and they spoke effusively about their reasons. “Wearing the niqab means you will get a good grade and go to paradise,” said Hodo Muse, 19, a Somali woman. “Every day people are giving me dirty looks for wearing it, but when you wear something for God you get a boost.”

One woman, Sajida Khaton, 24, interviewed as she sat discreetly in a Pizza Hut, said she did not wear the veil on the subway, a precaution her husband encourages for safety reasons. Sometimes, she said, she gets a kick out of the mocking.

“ ‘All right gorgeous,’ ” she said she had heard men say as she walked along the street. “I feel empowered,” she said. “They’d like to see, and they can’t.”

She often comes to the neighborhood restaurant along busy Whitechapel Road in East London for a slice or two, a habit, she said, that shows that even veiled women are well integrated into Britain’s daily life.

“I’m in Pizza Hut with my son,” said Ms. Khaton, nodding at her 4-year-old and speaking in a soft East London accent that bore no hint of her Bangladeshi heritage. “I was born here, I’ve never been to Bangladesh. I certainly don’t feel Bangladeshi. So when they say, ‘Go back home,’ where should I go?”