



## **Veiling: Tradition, Identity and Fashion**

*Why do Muslim women adopt hijab?*

### **Stefanie Sinclair:**

Would you mind telling us a little bit about your research and the different projects you've been involved in please?

### **Emma Tarlo:**

Well I got interested in Muslim women's dress in around 2004 which was just about the time when the French government had said that they were going to ban the wearing of religious symbols in schools.

And so I began to get interested in seeing how people in Britain were responding to that proposition. And at that time I began to realise the extraordinary diversity of different types of Muslim dress that there were in Britain. And the different types of emotional investment that people had in it.

And so I began to start doing research really about why people wear what they wear. And I was also interested in the fact that so often that debate is viewed in terms of, is it a question of force.

Or is it a question of choice. And is it right or is it wrong. It's viewed in these very sort of moral terms.

And I was actually interested in the fact that Muslim women like any other women in Britain are trying to work out how to present themselves in the public space. And there's all sorts of different issues that come in to play.

It may be religion. It may be politics but it may be family background. It may be cultural heritage but it may also be fashion. It may be your relationship with your peers.

So it can't just be boiled down to religion or politics. So in a sense I just got interested in exploring as an anthropologist. So exploring sort of ethnographically through people's own dress practices and how they understand their own dress practices.

Looking at what they were trying to do. What sort of new fashions were emerging in this context.

So I did research with people. Sometimes working in areas with a strong sort of particular ethnic and religious population.

Like parts of East London where there are a lot of Muslims. But also working with Muslims who are not living in these sort of pockets of concentration like that.

And also with university students, with entrepreneurs who were interested in sort of developing new types of Muslim fashion. And also with people who were trading things both in markets and shops. But also online. So I was just sort of interested in immersing myself in that whole sort of area really.

Attending Islamic events, looking at those debates online, interviewing people and getting a sense of what was going on in relation to dress.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

So why do Muslim women actually adopt the hijab?

**Emma Tarlo:**

I think it's difficult to say there would be any one reason why people would adopt hijab because people may be attracted to it from a variety of different reasons.

But one is trying to practice Islam as part of everyday life and not just as something that you do at the moment of prayer. So it's part of a kind of incorporating a set of values into everyday life.

But it's also about having an assertive presence and being proud to be Muslim. And a kind of badge of identity if you like and that's very important to people. Because there's a very powerful sense of recognition that people have when they see other people in hijab. They feel a sense of bond towards them.

And so this sense of a kind of bond that extends beyond your immediate family networking kin and has this sort of global potential is really important. And you see it in how people interact.

You see it within universities that the hijabi girls recognise each other and they get together quite early on. They feel a sense of affinity with each other.

You see it when people travel abroad. And they feel that they can recognise and react to each other. Total strangers on the basis of hijab. And you also come across it very strongly on the Internet through the sort of exchange of stories and all of that.

So that sense of a building of a kind of community I think is really important through this visible self. And I think since 9/11 when there's been such a focus on Muslims and a kind of suspicion around Muslims in relation to appearances that has actually motivated a lot more people to invest in being Muslim in the public sphere in a more assertive way.

Sometimes as a gesture of solidarity. They'll look at sort of a larger scale sort of global political situation. And they'll feel that Muslims have been treated or stigmatised in a particular way. And they'll want to identify with that. So that can also be a quite important element of it.

