



In the name of Allah,
the Compassionate, the Merciful

MODESTY AND HIJAB

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him (PBUH), has said, “*Modesty and faith are interlinked, if either of them is lacking, the other is lacking too.*” There was a time in America when a woman did not go out in public with unrelated men, when men lowered their gaze to women, and when women and men alike dressed tastefully with dignity and humility. Today, not only is it acceptable for women to dress provocatively, it is encouraged, particularly by the men who look on with no shame. It is easy to understand how the lack of modesty has evolved in the West in general, and in America in particular, as virtuous ideals and morals are now scoffed at in the name of secularism. As the Prophet (PBUH) said, without faith, there is no modesty. As our society loses its faith, so goes our modesty.

Over a thousand years ago, Islam sought to change the surrounding society that knew the word *haya*, roughly translated as modesty, bashfulness, and shame, but did not understand its meaning. Nudity was not only common in every day life, it was even part of religious rituals. Islam changed the society in such a way that *haya* became one of its most cherished values. Today, we continue to celebrate this value and adhere to the teachings of modesty revealed by God and exemplified by the Prophet (PBUH).

Before one can speak of outward modesty, one has to be cognizant of inward modesty as a means for truly acquiring the former. The old adage rings true, “Modesty begins with the heart, not the hemline.” The Prophet (PBUH) said, “*Every religion has its characteristic, and the characteristic of Islam is modesty.*” Being modest is not only reflected in the way we dress, nor does it only pertain to women. Modesty is reflected in our speech and conduct. It includes feeling shy to disobey our Lord and feeling shame if one sins or acts

inappropriately, whether in public or private. It includes looking away when we see sinful acts on television or in movies, and feeling shy to say lewd things or talk about private matters. Being modest is inherent in the things we say, the way we act, and the things we look at.

Modesty is an intrinsic quality in humans that manifests itself, for instance, in a natural human urge to cover one's private parts. According to the Qur'an, when Adam and Hawa' (Eve) ate from the forbidden tree, they became aware their private parts were exposed and began to cover themselves with the leaves of the garden, as a natural result of their modesty. This inherent modesty is a quality that distinguishes human beings from animals. Animals follow their instincts without feeling any shame or a sense of right or wrong. As the Prophet (PBUH) said, *"If you have no modesty, do as you wish."*

Islam has mandated certain legislations that induce this sense of modesty within humans. These legislations range from seeking permission before entering any room and isolating oneself when changing clothes, to mandating certain manners of dress for men and women alike. There is clear and decisive scholarly consensus on the mandating of *hijab* for women. In the Qur'an, Allah (SWT)¹ states,

"Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty – they shouldn't display their beauty and ornaments except what [must ordinarily] appear thereof and they should draw their headcovering over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment." (24:31)

Allah (SWT) commands the Prophet (PBUH) to tell the believing women to take a series of steps: 1) to lower their gaze, which is mandated for both women and men alike; 2) to guard their chastity or sexuality; and 3) to conceal their natural beauty, which scholars have interpreted to mean the whole body except for the face and hands.

The word "headcovering" or "*khimar*" more familiar in our times as *hijab*, refers to the cloth that covers the head. Women at the time of the revelation wore their headcovers tied back behind their necks, leaving the front of the neck and opening at the top of the dress exposed. The revelation *confirmed* the practice of covering the head, and directed women to tie the headcover in front and let it drape down to conceal the throat and dress opening at the top.

In addition to the headcovering, modest dress includes opaque, loose fitting clothing that does not reveal a woman's shape. Make-up and perfume would defeat the purpose of dressing modestly as it attracts negative attention from the opposite sex and exploits one's sexuality.

The decision to wear hijab may be one of the most important decisions a woman ever makes. Consequently, this decision should come about as a result of reflection, remembrance of Allah (SWT), and one's own personal volition. Unfortunately, when sisters cover by force, the desire to please Allah (SWT) is inundated by the pressure to appease others rather than to please Allah (SWT).

Muslim women have been blessed with the highest honor and distinction by Allah (SWT) as He states in the Qur'an,

"O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their outer garments around them [when in public]. That will be better, so they may be recognized and not harassed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful." (33:59)

A Muslim woman is recognized as a chaste, God-fearing woman and her distinction is emphasized as a believing woman, which any decent man would be motivated to protect, rather than abuse. Here, God explicitly refers to modestly dressed Muslim women as a sign of purity and dignity. He highlights the woman as chaste and sets her apart from the

immoral behavior associated with women who dress immodestly.

Indeed the headcovering pre-dates Islam as Christians and Jews have long recognized the headcovering not only in the house of God but in public as well. It is said that some Jewish women kept themselves covered at all times. In public, they not only covered their heads, but the lower part of their faces as well. This was a matter of moral and religious duty for Jewish women, not merely a matter of culture or convenience.² Christian women maintained the practice of covering their head up to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They acted in obedience to the verse in 1st Corinthians, which states,



“But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered.” (11:5-6).

In today’s times, dressing immodestly and even provocatively is a norm that is no longer looked down upon, rather encouraged in our society. Wearing the hijab and dressing modestly may seem like an ancient tradition that has no place in today’s modern world. On the contrary, as Nobel Peace Laureate Tawakkul Karman stated when journalists implied her hijab was not proportionate with her level of intellect and education, she replied,

“Man in early times was almost naked, and as his intellect evolved he started wearing clothes. What I am today and what I’m wearing represents the highest level of thought and civilization that man has achieved, and is not regressive. It’s the removal of clothes again that is regressive back to ancient times.”

Oftentimes, when modesty is discussed within our communities, the discussion almost always exclusively revolves around the modesty of Muslim women. However, the Prophet (PBUH) places the greater responsibility upon men when discussing communal modesty as he states, *“Be kind to your parents, and your children will be kind to you; be chaste, and your women will be chaste.”* A greater focus needs to be put on men as contributors to the decline of modesty within the community. If men lose their sense of modesty, their immorality will negatively influence women within society. If one takes a moment to reflect on the way this has plagued our society, its truth will manifest. When Muslim males gawk at half-naked women (whether in public, on television, or on the internet), act and speak lewdly, and show a greater appreciation for provocatively dressed women, the message this sends to Muslim women who attempt to

¹ The abbreviation (SWT) has been used to represent the Arabic expression (Subhanahu Wa-Ta’ala), which may be translated in English as, “Glorified and Exalted be He.”

² Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 359-360.

maintain their dignity inwardly and outwardly is a loss of hope in their male counterparts.

The fact of the matter is that we live in a hyper-sexualized world obsessed with appearances, and this presents severe challenges upon the Muslim spiritual psyche. We are bombarded with immodest images (oftentimes against our will) of the human body that affect us consciously and unconsciously, making it an uphill battle to be chaste and modest. Nevertheless, the burden lies on men and women alike to preserve the sanctity of modesty by focusing inwardly in order to manifest it outwardly. Indeed, modesty begins with the heart, not the hemline.



About IONA

The Islamic Organization of North America, IONA, is an organization dedicated to reviving the Qur'an in the hearts of Muslims while bringing its message to non-Muslims.

The obligations of a Muslim, as ordained by the Qur'an and Sunnah, can be understood as having four levels:

1. A Muslim is required to develop real faith and conviction in one's heart – **Iman.**
2. A Muslim is required to live a life of complete submission to the will of Allah (SWT) – **Ibadah.**
3. A Muslim is required to propagate and disseminate the message of Islam to humanity as a whole – **Shahada 'alan-Nas.**
4. A Muslim is required to try his/her utmost to promote and struggle for the establishment of justice – **Iqamat-ud-Deen.**

The objective of IONA is to assist North American Muslims in fulfilling the above obligations as well as inviting non-Muslims toward Islam, for the sake of our salvation in the hereafter and for seeking the love and mercy of God Almighty.



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**The Islamic Organization of North America,
is a non-profit organization dedicated to
reviving the Qur'an into the hearts of Muslims,
while bringing its message to non-Muslims.**