

GANNETT

Muslim girls pair fashion, faith in hijab choices

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By Deborah Lynn Blumberg

Many non-Muslims interpret the headscarves Islamic women wear as a symbol of oppression. But for Itidal Hashif, 17, and other Muslim youth, covering their heads is a show of faith that can enhance character over physical beauty.

“It’s a huge responsibility,” said Hashif, a student whose family is from Palestine and who attends the Noor-UI-Iman school in South Brunswick, N.J.

Most conservative Muslim-American girls wear a headscarf full time once they reach puberty. In Arabic, the word “hijab” means covering or barrier and describes the concept of modest dress and behavior written about in the Quran and Hadith, which are the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammed.

In Western countries, the word “hijab” has become synonymous with “headscarf.” With scarves that vary in design, shape and size, and with multiple ways of securing them, with decorative pins and creative layering and wrapping technique, hijab is a religious commitment, but it’s also an accessory, the girls say.

“You have to match the headscarf with everything you’re wearing,” said Hashif, who adds that scarves become part of a woman’s outfit. “Wearing hijab becomes like putting on your shoes,” Hashif said. “It feels so normal.”

Kholoud Shaheen, 18, a classmate of Hashif’s, has worn a headscarf for the last six years. At her home, Shaheen, whose family is from Egypt, sifts through drawers stuffed with white, black and blue cotton head coverings.

Most days, Shaheen wears white, her favorite hijab color, but on Fridays she’ll wear a headscarf with a more intricate design for afternoon prayer.

“Some people buy outfits to match their scarves because they have so many,” said Shaheen, who gets most of her headscarves online or from friends and relatives who bring them back from trips overseas. “Wearing the hijab really becomes part of your routine.”

Most Muslim-American schools require girls from around grade four and older to wear the hijab.

Abir Catovic, one of the girls' teachers, started to wear the hijab in college about 20 years ago, she said. The headscarves were harder to find in the United States then, said Catovic, who often made her own head coverings from fabric she bought.

Women who wear a headscarf full time remove it only at home, where male relatives are allowed to see them without the covering. They also go without at all-female gatherings. The most common scarf style is a fabric piece folded into a triangle and secured at the chin with a safety pin. When exercising, women often wear a tighter, two-piece scarf, which includes a head cap ... a fitting bandanna like piece of fabric under a loose slip-on scarf.

Many Muslim women have started to don headscarves during both work and play, and companies are starting to catch on. Last year, the Swedish firm Ikea introduced a blue and yellow hijab with the Ikea logo for employees in its Edmonton, England, store. Nike is now working with the United Nations to craft athletic hijabs.

Most young girls wear a one-piece slip-on because the scarves don't require a safety or straight pin to hold them on.

For the last two years, Du'aa Moharram, 8, also a Noor-Ul-Iman pupil, has worn one during prayer at school. Eanass Fahmy, explains the latest trends.

"Last year, solid colored two-pieces were in," said Fahmy, whose blue and white scarf was cinched with a tiny, intricate leaf-shaped pin. "Now it's patterned two-pieces." A lot of young women also have started to wear two different colored chiffon scarfs, said Fahmy, one on top of the other.

Across the living room, Afnaan, 13, Fahmy's oldest daughter, folded a pink and purple flower-printed scarf into a triangle, draping the fabric over her head and clasping it with a safety pin.

"When some people think of hijab, they think of a long black robe," Afnaan said. "But it's not like that."

Along with their middle sister, Hanya, 11, and their mother, Du'aa and Afnaan own close to 100 colorful scarves and often borrow from each other. They buy hijab online. Hashif knows a few Muslim teenagers who attend public school who decided not to wear scarves after classmates ridiculed them.

"They've gotten comments like 'you don't have hair, that's why you wear it,'" Hashif said. "People do stare at you and ask questions, and, especially after September 11th, some people are afraid to wear it."