

Veiling  
CINDY VAN DEN BREMEN

Veiling has been – and still is – the subject of much discussion in Europe, the Netherlands being no exception. Some argue that the veil counters women’s rights. Others even see it as a provocative gesture against European values. From a seemingly more practical point of view, the question of safety has also entered the debate on wearing headscarves, in particular during sports activities.

# A Modern Interpretation of the Headscarf

Since the arrival of migrant labourers with their families in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and with it the appearance of the headscarf in public life in Europe, the practice of veiling has become a major issue. This also holds for the Netherlands. The scarf was not associated with fashion, but rather with the issues of cultural discord and discrimination against women. Although in Western fashion the wearing headscarves was a major trend in the 1950s and early 1960s, veiling by/of Muslim women has become the subject of debate in terms of whether it contributes to or inhibits the integration of Muslims in European societies.

Instances of being forbidden to wear headscarves in the Netherlands have occurred with some frequency. Muslim girls and women here have filed many a complaint with the Committee for Equal Treatment, a state institution created to fight discrimination on grounds of race, gender, and conviction. Some years ago, this committee declared that no-one should be denied the right to wear a headscarf, however, more recently the same committee stated that the commonly worn headscarves created a possible danger during sports activities. It was suggested that girls simply wear a swim cap with a high turtleneck instead. No Muslim girl took this alternative seriously. Many continued to skip gym class. Because it is held that gym class is meant to stimulate team building and interaction among students, the controversy may constitute a hindrance to further integration.

As a designer, the veil poses an interesting challenge for me: how to come up with a solution which combines Islamic precepts with Dutch regulations and expectations. I had to design a new headscarf that is safe for sports and at the same time covers the head, hair and neck. I also had to avoid re-



producing an already-existing solution, such as a hood or a cap. These alternatives are an offer without engagement. Therefore, I designed an accessory with its own originality and charm; one that refers to the headscarf and thus carries its religious value. At the same time, due to the stigmatization, I wanted to create something that did not too literally refer to religion. That way it would be seen as simply an accessory – wearing it not necessarily meaning one is a Muslim. Many Muslim girls and women that I interviewed during my research complained that they constantly felt that they had to defend their choice of wearing a headscarf.

While designing the sport headscarves, I did not only focus on the target group: I designed a head-cover that is still suitable for Islamic purposes, yet without having to convey that message. I created a line of sports accessories that can be worn by anyone, regardless their choice of function, religion or even gender. Four types emerged, each with special colours, materials and shapes depending on the particular sport. For instance, for the ‘tennis model’, I looked into conventional tennis clothing for women, which includes a short skirt. However, many Muslim women would never wear such a skirt. Nonetheless, since it is so characteristic of the sport I assimilated it in the collar. I also designed a black and white tricot ‘Aerobics model’, a dark and light grey lycra ‘Skate model’ with neon accent, and a dark red fleece ‘Outdoor model’. During the design process I asked Muslim girls for their opinions. Since I myself do not wear a headscarf, their feedback on the choice of design, material, colours and the way they close was vital. This cooperation proved interesting and useful, as it revealed, for example, the importance placed on the fact that the headscarf should not make noise and that using a zipper at the neck is uncomfortable. Besides visiting the various organizations that deal with Muslim women, I also sought the advice of an Imam so as to have my designs judged in terms of Islamic regulations. He was very enthusiastic about this undertaking.

- Outdoor model
- Skate model
- Aerobics model



Tennis model



PHOTOS: CINDY VAN DEN BREMEN

My choice to undertake this subject was not only motivated by the will to help resolve the problem of Muslim girls in gym class, but also to create awareness in the Western world that many women do actually choose to cover themselves. In the Netherlands, the opinion that ‘all girls wear them because their fathers tell them to’, and that ‘all women wear them because their husbands tell them to’ is far outdated. Many girls who are born in the Netherlands but raised with the culture and values of their immigrant parents, find themselves struggling with identity. They are, in the eyes of some, still ‘for-

eigners’ and yet to others they are perceived as ‘Dutch’: perhaps they are both. While emphasizing their individuality, they find comfort in wearing the headscarf – symbolic of their religion and beliefs. Many women even experience wearing the headscarf as a freedom. They can interact and integrate without losing their own values and without being judged by their own community. ◆

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