

Islamophobia And Stereotypes of Muslims in The Use of Hijab in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract- This paper examines the persistent issues of Islamophobia and stereotypes surrounding the wearing of the hijab by Muslim women in Rivers State, Nigeria. Despite the hijab's deeply rooted spiritual, cultural, and moral significance in Islam, Muslim women in Rivers State often encounter discrimination, verbal abuse, and institutional exclusion because of it. Drawing on interviews, legal cases, and relevant sociological literature, the study highlights the dual dimensions of the hijab. It is used as a symbol of empowerment and identity for Muslim women and as a trigger for prejudice and marginalization within secular and Christian-dominated spaces. The paper argues that misconceptions stem largely from ignorance, religious intolerance, and the misuse of the hijab by a minority, which has distorted perceptions among non-Muslims. The study also emphasizes the need for policy reforms within educational and institutional settings, alongside community education and interfaith dialogue, to foster understanding and protect the rights of Muslim women to express their faith freely.

Keywords: *Hijab, Islamophobia, Stereotypes, Rivers State, Discrimination, Gender, Religious Freedom*

I. INTRODUCTION

The hijab is one of the most visible symbols of Islamic identity. As both a religious and cultural marker, it has historically represented modesty, dignity, and devotion among Muslim women (Kamali, 2015). However, its interpretation outside the Islamic context often invokes misunderstanding, suspicion, or even hostility. In Rivers State, Nigeria, these misperceptions have translated into acts of discrimination, exclusion, and stereotyping directed toward Muslim women who wear the hijab.

Globally, Islamophobia has been identified as a structural and cultural phenomenon that targets visible Muslims, particularly women (Bakali, 2021). Rivers State, though part of a multicultural and multi-religious Nigeria, shares this pattern of bias. Muslim women report being stigmatized, marginalized in schools and workplaces, and subjected to offensive remarks or demands to remove their hijabs in public spaces. These experiences demonstrate that Islamophobia in Rivers State is not confined to overt hostility but also includes systemic and institutionalized forms of discrimination.

This paper explores the intersection between Islamophobia, stereotypes, and the lived experiences of hijab-wearing Muslim women in Rivers State. Drawing on interviews, court cases, and scholarly analyses, it interrogates both the societal misconceptions of the hijab and the internal challenges related to its misuse by some adherents. The goal is to contribute to scholarly discourse on religious freedom, gender equality, and interfaith relations in Nigeria.

II. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding Hijab in Islamic Context

The term hijab originates from the Arabic word meaning “a veil” or “covering” (Abdel Haleem, 2010). In Islamic practice, hijab extends beyond clothing; it embodies a holistic concept of modesty encompassing appearance, behavior, and interactions

between genders. The Qur'an instructs both men and women to lower their gaze and maintain modesty:

“Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them. And Allah is well aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty, and not display their beauty except that which appears, and that they should draw their veils over their chests” (Qur'an 24:30–31).

The hijab, therefore, serves as both a spiritual obligation and a social statement. It reflects a woman's commitment to faith, self-respect, and moral integrity (Tarlo, 2010; Ahmed, 2011). It also allows Muslim women to define their identity within pluralistic societies (Bakali, 2021).

Islamophobia and Stereotype

Islamophobia refers to unfounded fear, hatred, or prejudice against Islam and Muslims, often leading to discrimination and marginalization. Stereotypes, in this context, simplify and generalize Muslim practices in ways that distort their meaning (Bakali, 2021). Muslim women, due to their visible religious markers like hijab, often become the primary targets of such biases. These biases reinforce gendered Islamophobia where women's dress and bodies become sites of ideological conflict and control (Roald, 2001).

The study applies the Social Identity Theory as a framework, which explains how in-group and out-group distinctions foster prejudice (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In Rivers State, where Christianity dominates, Muslims constitute an out-group, and visible markers such as hijab heighten differentiation, contributing to exclusion and discrimination.

III. THE HIJAB IN NIGERIAN AND RIVERS STATE CONTEXTS

Nigeria's plural religious landscape has historically produced tensions around visible Islamic symbols. In predominantly Muslim states, the hijab is normalized, while in Southern States like Rivers State where Muslims form a minority, it often attracts suspicion or derision. The hijab, viewed by some as an emblem

of extremism, becomes entangled in political and cultural anxieties.

Muslim women in Rivers State report persistent stereotypes, including being labeled “Boko Haram,” “Shari'ah women,” or “Hausa agents.” Such derogatory names underscore how religious identity intersects with ethnic and political narratives in Nigeria (Bakali, 2021). According to interviews conducted with Alhaja Adekilekun and Mrs. Abdul Wahab (May 2025), Muslim women have been publicly mocked and isolated in marketplaces and communities, compounding their experiences of alienation and marginalization.

Misconceptions and Misrepresentation of Hijab

The hijab is not solely a garment; it is a symbol of piety and submission to God. Yet, misconceptions surrounding it persist. According to the study's participants, many non-Muslims in Rivers State perceive the hijab as a sign of oppression or extremism. These assumptions have deepened Islamophobic sentiments across various social institutions, including schools, markets, and workplaces.

Some non-Muslim respondents also express disappointment over what they perceive as the “abuse” of the hijab by some Muslim women who fail to embody its associated moral expectations. As one respondent, Oluchi, argued, “those Muslim girls selling herbal medicine are using the hijab and yet committing illegal sexual intercourse” (Interview, May 2025). Such narratives reflect not only moral policing but also how individual misconduct can distort collective religious identity. Consequently, the hijab's spiritual essence becomes overshadowed by stereotypes and moral judgments.

However, this criticism underscores the complexity of symbolic representation. As Roald (2001) and Kamali (2015) note, hijab-wearing does not confer infallibility but symbolizes striving toward virtue. The misuse of hijab by a few should not define the entire population of Muslim women.

IV. INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION AND LEGAL CONTROVERSIES

The Case of Educational Institutions

Institutional discrimination remains a major driver of Islamophobia in Rivers State. For instance, at Nigerian Navy Secondary Schools in Borikiri, Muslim female students are reportedly prohibited from wearing the hijab, unlike their counterparts in Army and Air Force schools (Interview, Imam Adekilekun, May 2025). This inconsistent policy reveals institutional bias and violates constitutional rights to religious freedom.

This issue mirrors nationwide conflicts over hijab bans. In Lagos State, the government's 2014 circular banning hijabs in public schools was overturned by the courts in favor of Muslim students, affirming their right to religious expression (Ogunyemi, 2014). Similarly, Ogun State and Kaduna State courts ruled that hijab bans infringed on students' constitutional rights to freedom of religion (Adebayo, 2016; Ibrahim, 2018). Despite these victories, enforcement remains inconsistent, reflecting underlying societal resistance to accommodation of religious diversity.

Psychological and Educational Effects

Studies by (Moffic et al., 2017) show that discrimination and stereotypes in educational environments negatively affect students' academic performance and mental health. Prohibiting hijabs, beyond violating rights, fosters alienation and psychological distress among Muslim girls. Many feel they must choose between their faith and education—an untenable position in a secular democracy that professes religious freedom.

Islamophobia in Social and Economic Life

Islamophobia in Rivers State extends beyond educational institutions. In markets, workplaces, and social gatherings, hijab-wearing women face verbal abuse and exclusion. Interviews with Muslim women like Hajia Rahma Sotonye (February 2025) reveal that these women are often denied social and economic opportunities due to prejudice. They are considered outsiders or “Hausa agents,” regardless of their actual ethnic background.

This intersection of gender, religion, and ethnicity vividly illustrates intersectional discrimination. Muslim women, already marginalized as women, face an additional layer of exclusion due to their religious identity (Bakali, 2021). Such marginalization curtails access to empowerment opportunities and violates Nigeria's constitutional protections of equality and freedom of religion.

V. THE SOCIOCULTURAL DYNAMICS OF HIJAB DISCRIMINATION

The Rivers State case reflects a broader Nigerian dilemma where religion and ethnicity overlap in shaping social perceptions. In Christian-majority regions, Islamic symbols like the hijab are politicized and associated with northern dominance or extremism. As Imam Adekilekun explains, Muslim students often feel “excluded and marginalized for expressing their faith” (Interview, May 2025). These dynamics are not only faith-based but also class-based. Women in urban and mixed communities report less tolerance than those in integrated or predominantly Muslim neighborhoods. This suggests that Islamophobia thrives where social contact between Muslims and non-Muslims is limited, confirming Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), which posits that prejudice decreases with meaningful intergroup interaction.

Reclaiming the Hijab: Empowerment and Identity

Many Muslim women in Rivers State nevertheless perceive the hijab not as a burden but as a statement of empowerment. By choosing to wear it despite hostility, they assert agency over their faith and bodies. As Bakali (2021) observes, for many women, hijab represents resistance against Western-defined standards of beauty and an embrace of spiritual autonomy.

Hijab fosters solidarity among Muslim women, creating a sense of belonging to a global faith community. In minority contexts, this collective identity provides psychological resilience against discrimination. Moreover, it counters objectification by shifting attention from physical appearance to intellect and character (Ahmed, 2011). Thus, the

hijab transcends fabric, it is a philosophical and moral commitment to modesty, dignity, and self-definition as prescribed by Allah in the Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W)

Legal and Constitutional Dimensions

Nigeria's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion (Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution), yet the implementation of these rights remains uneven. Court rulings across various states (Ogunyemi, 2014; Adebayo, 2016; Ibrahim, 2018; Olatunji, 2021) have consistently reaffirmed Muslim women's right to wear hijabs in public spaces and institutions. Nevertheless, state-level resistance to these judgments signals an implementation gap. Religious discrimination in public institutions contravenes Nigeria's obligations under international human rights instruments, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). Upholding hijab rights is thus not only a constitutional duty but also an adherence to global human rights frameworks.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

- **Policy Reform:** Educational and government institutions should standardize dress code policies to accommodate religious diversity without compromising security or discipline.
- **Public Education:** Community sensitization programs can demystify hijab and correct misconceptions.
- **Interfaith Dialogue:** Encouraging dialogue among religious leaders fosters mutual understanding and respect.
- **Legal Enforcement:** Courts' pronouncements on religious rights must be enforced to deter institutional discrimination.
- **Empowerment of Muslim Women:** Leadership and advocacy training can help Muslim women articulate their rights and challenge stereotypes from within the system.
- **Creating inclusive institutions** protects not only Muslims' rights but also strengthens Nigeria's democratic fabric.

CONCLUSION

The hijab in Rivers State stands at the crossroads of faith, identity, and prejudice. For Muslim women, it symbolizes devotion, modesty, and empowerment. Yet for segments of society steeped in stereotypes, it has become a source of fear and exclusion. Islamophobia, reinforced by institutional discrimination and societal misunderstanding, has marginalized many Muslim women in Rivers State's schools, markets, and workplaces. While some misuse of hijab contributes to distorted perceptions, the broader issue lies in ignorance and intolerance. Genuine religious tolerance requires respecting diversity without coercion or prejudice. State institutions, religious leaders, and civil society must work collaboratively to ensure that Muslim women can express their faith freely and confidently. Upholding the dignity of hijab-wearing women affirms Nigeria's commitment to equality, religious freedom, and social justice.

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