

Is Anyone Else Confused About the Hijab?

Last week, my colleague Annie Holmquist [touched on the controversy](#) surrounding the 2017 World Chess Champions, and the decision of the host nation, Iran, to require women to wear the hijab.

At least one U.S. champion, Nazi Paikidze-Barnes, has called Iran's request "absolutely unacceptable" and is threatening to boycott the championship.

Are the Iranians out of bounds by asking female visitors to wear the Hijab? Many people will reflexively say, *Of course they are*. But there is an old saying: "When in Rome, do as the Romans." And is covering one's head with cloth really an onerous request?

The backlash seems to be the result of what the hijab represents. It's a symbol of Sharia Law. Islamic clerics have used the law to defend [wife beating](#), "[temporary marriage](#)," [child marriage](#), and other practices that subjugate women. Women who live under Sharia Law and don't wear the proper clothing can face [stoning](#), [mutilation](#), and other punishments carried out by religious vigilantes. Because of this, it's no surprise that many people in our culture, which prides itself on female empowerment, balk at the notion of forcing women to wear a hijab.

What's interesting, however, is that hijab has also become a *positive* symbol. It represents diversity and multiculturalism.

Earlier this year, a movement was afoot to [have an American athlete who is Muslim carry the U.S. flag](#) at the Olympic Games simply because she chose to wear the hijab beneath her fencing gear. Media ran articles [celebrating the hijab's beauty](#); some countries actually are [running commercials](#) celebrating the

hijab's "beauty and difference." There is a hashtag on Twitter celebrating the hijab: #HijabToMe. Even Playboy, a brand made famous by featuring women without clothes, is [getting in on the hijab action](#).

Many Muslim women [embrace the hijab](#), claiming it's about modesty and empowerment, not oppression. (Women living under Sharia Law, of course, might not feel free to claim otherwise.)

But Muslim perspectives aside, there seems to be some cultural confusion in the West on what the hijab represents.

If the hijab is a symbol of oppression, why are we celebrating it? If it's not a symbol of oppression, why are we offended by a nation in the Middle East asking women to cover their heads in accordance with local custom?

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