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| Speak Up – KōrerotiaWearing the hijab21 August 2019 |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally  | E ngā mana, E ngā reo, E ngā hau e whāTēnā koutou katoaNau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right |
| Sondos  | “Rabb-ishrah li sadri, wa yassir li ‘amri, Wah-lul ‘uqdatam-min-li-saani, Yaf-qahuu qawlii” [Islamic *Dua’a* / prayer]. That means, “Oh my Lord, open for me my trust, grant me self-confidence, contentment and boldness. Ease my task for me and remove the impediment from my speech so that they may understand what they say.”  |
| All | Amen. |
| Sally | Today we’re talking about wearing a hijab and it’s an opportunity to talk with four hijab-wearing women who live here in Christchurch, and their experiences - particularly why they wear it and how they feel about wearing a hijab in New Zealand as a non-Muslim majority country. Just to start the conversation before we get into your introductions, how do you feel about the term ‘hijabi’? |
| Denise | Personally I like it because it just means a woman who wears a hijab. We have another term which is ‘niqabi’ which is a person who wears a niqab. So I’m proud to wear a hijab, so I’m proud to be a hijabi.  |
| Sally | So we could say we are talking four hijabis today and that would be OK?  |
| All | Yes.  |
| Sally | Great, OK. Well if you could please introduce yourselves. We’ll start with you, Hafsa. |
| Hafsa | I moved here from India 12 years ago to pursue a PhD at Lincoln University. After that I have worked in local government, I’ve taught at Ara, and now I’m at Lincoln University. I also do a lot of volunteering so I’m on a board for a couple of charities and I’m the vice president for education outreach for Project Management Institute New Zealand. So that’s the professional bit. I’ve got a family - two young kids and a husband - so life is busy.  |
| Sally | And you are a Shi’a Muslim?  |
| Hafsa | Yes.  |
| Sally | Could you explain a little bit about the difference between Shi’a and Sunni? |
| Hafsa | I’ll just keep it very at the top level. So the difference between a Shi’a and Sunni Muslim is that the Shi’a Muslims continue to follow the family of the Prophet, whereas the Sunni Muslims continue to follow the companions of the Prophet.   |
| Sally | Thank you, nice concise answer. OK, Denise?  |
| Denise | My name is Denise and I was born in Timaru but I grew up in Westport. I converted to Islam about 18 years ago and I started wearing the hijab about eight years ago.  |
| Sally | What made you start to wear the hijab ten years after converting?  |
| Denise | It’s a long story. It was something that I had been thinking about doing on and off. Of course I wore the hijab when I went to the mosque or female gatherings but during the series of earthquakes when I was fairly up close and personal with death and a couple of times because of where I was and in the experience of the earthquakes I thought I was going to die, I think that I realised the one thing if I died that I would be disappointed in was not wearing a hijab. It was June or July where we had two earthquakes on the same day, the second time that I was under the table that day watching building move and seeing bits of paint fall off the roof onto the table, I heard a verse from the Qur’an and it says, “When you are out in the middle of the ocean, you cry to Allah for help and when you come back on the shore you forget all about it.” I thought, you have been thinking about this for many years, use this experience to give yourself the strength to just wear the hijab. And after that it’s just been easy and beautiful and wonderful. There are some trials that come with it but spiritually it’s added a lot of depth.  |
| Qaali  | My name is Qaali Mohamed, I’m from Somalia. I came from New Zealand since 1995 and I’m a mother of six. I’m a bilingual worker in the CRS [Christchurch Resettlement Services] community, I’m also an interpreter. I advocate for women’s needs and health and children, and young people. I was born to hijab, my family, everybody… Because I was born in Muslim and nobody actually forced to wear it so it’s a decision for me that I have chosen because it was a norm for me. I get stronger in my hijab after I got married, especially by the time I have my first daughter because for that I wanted to be for my daughters, to show them how special and strong you can be as a Muslim female. It gives me the strength and having to learn… I haven’t experienced bad where other people might so I haven’t had any issues.  |
| Sondos | My name is Sondos Quraan. I am 19 years old, I am a student at the University of Canterbury. I am currently in my second year of law; it’s pretty full on. I’ve been living in New Zealand for about 16 years now. I moved here when I was about three years old from Jordan where I was born and this has been my home ever since. I consider both New Zealand – well, Christchurch to be exact - and Jordan to be my first homes. I don’t really differentiate between the two because for me Christchurch is the first home I ever really properly knew and the first place I settled when I came to New Zealand and that’s kind of something I can’t forget and something I value a lot.  |
| Sally | To start our discussion, what is it that encourages or incentivises Muslim women to wear the hijab? So what is that the Qur’an saying about dress for females?  |
| Qaali | Hijab is about barrier and also it’s about Muslims’ man and women station, especially the man showing any part of their bodies that attract or visually shows other people, the female side to go and look around. As a woman it’s about barrier for covering your hair and the way you speak, how you walk. The one we are focusing on today is the one in this. For example especially if you are female, suppose the voice is loud so all those things come to hijab, the way I understand it. I am no scholar so I have been forgiven for that.  |
| Hafsa | I am not a scholar either but I think it is to do with modesty and how you dress up and how you present yourself in front of others, how you talk, how you behave. So it kind of comes together in every way. And when you use the hijab, it’s not just for women, I really want to emphasise for that. It is for men as well and I think because of the portrayal of media it’s often taken that the hijab is just for women, it’s not, it is for men as well.  |
| Sondos | There is a strong misconception about the hijab that the hijab is just covering your hair and like she said, it’s not just for women, it’s for men as well. It’s highlighted in various verses in the Qur’an - and obviously there’s interpretations on the level of hijab - but there’s one I wanted to mention in particular: Chapter 24 of the Holy Qur’an, it basically says in the verse 24:30, “Tell the believing men to reduce their vision and guard their private parts and tell the believing women to reduce some of their vision and guard their private parts.” It also talks about who women should guard themselves to and who women are exempt from uncovering themselves. It highlights that they don’t have to wear the hijab in front of their husbands, fathers, brothers, their husbands’ father, their sons, their brothers’ sons. Pretty much anyone that is from the family. And of course, we don’t cover in front of women.  |
| Denise | If I can add something and you’ll have to correct my Arabic. In the verse that I like in the Qur’an, it’s not actually talking about the hijab but the word that they use is *khimer* - and I’m trying to go for ‘veiled’ not ‘donkey’ because my pronunciation is not always correct! So sometimes when the Qur’an is being translated the word is translated as ‘scarf’ and in English, scarf can be worn around the head but it can also be worn around the neck and not over the head. But *khimer* is like veil, it has to be worn around the head. About the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him, many women already wore scarves across the head to cover it and that was Jewish women, Pagan women, Christian women and so what it was telling them to do is take that covering which was usually around the back of their neck and to just draw it around their chest as well. We do talk about it as modesty but I think modesty is not necessarily a bad thing, modesty doesn’t mean you have no self-belief, that you don’t think yourself worthy. It’s just saying that we don’t have to advertise everything that we’ve got. And New Zealand as a culture is quite a modest culture, we’re not a lot into self-promotion and self-advertising, and that’s more or less what the hijab is doing. It’s saying be strong in yourself and know your own worth but you don’t have to display it to everybody.  |
| Qaali | Not judge because of what you are wearing, you should be judged as an individual - that you are a human being, you are before you go through that so I shouldn’t be judged for myself because I am wearing a hijab, they shouldn’t make a label for me. And the thing is, the hijab gives me actually identity, it gives me strong wellbeing, young mother. It also gives me the power to show I really don’t care how people thinks, this is me and my religion and I really don’t care how you feel, how you think but I also respect you to respect me, my belief. Qur’an says, “Qual yaa ayyuhal Kaafiron. Laa 'a' budu ma ta'budoon” [Qur’an Chapter Alkafiroon 109 2-3], which means, “I believe my own religion, you believe yours.” So you are supposed to be not making judgement for that person and who they are. “Lakun deenukum wa liya deen” [Qur’an Chapter Alkafiroon 109 6]. That means I keep mine, you keep yours.  |
| Hafsa | Personally for me it’s about submission to my Lord. It emphasises to me that I am connected to my Lord and that is why wearing the hijab always reminds me of who I am and the values I need to stand for.  |
| Sondos | On the point of the *khimer* that sister Denise brought up, this is where the interpretation comes in and a lot of people are confused about it. I know I’ve been confused about it before. Some women interpret *khimer* as the covering of just the head and modest clothing and your face is uncovered, while other women believe that *khimer* means the full covering of also the face. So based on the interpretation some women wear the hijab, which is what most Muslims wear, and then there are some women that wear the niqab which is just their eyes showing, and then there’s also the burka where everything is covered. So it really is up to that person how they have interpreted it, how they have been brought up to see the hijab and what they are most comfortable with.  |
| Denise | I think in a lot of western countries, we look at a Muslim woman who appears to be wearing far more clothes and we look at a man who is not wearing quite as much and we say there seems to be… This is unfair. But we have laws about how much body we can show in the public domain and they are different for men and women. So for example on a hot Christchurch day, a man can take off his shirt and go into the mall. But if I went down to the dairy for some Tip Top ice-cream and I took off my shirt, that’s illegal. I don’t think a lot of women feel repressed that they can’t walk around topless, we feel that is guarding something that is special for us, that we don’t necessarily want out in the public domain, we don’t want it to be seen as a commodity for people.  |
| Sally | We might have our first song now, thank you very much for this really great introduction to wearing the hijab. |
|  | **MUSIC BY MAHER ZAIN – MAWLAYA** |
| Sally  | You’re listening to “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. I’m Sally Carlton and today we’re talking about wearing the hijab with Denise Jaeger, Dr. Hafsa Ahmed, Sondos Quraan and Qaali Mohamed, four hijabis in Christchurch. In this section, I’d like to think about your experiences of wearing the hijab. Qaali, you’ve already mentioned that you wear yours because it gives you a sense of power, a sense of strength, it’s something that your family did. And Denise, you mentioned why you chose to wear it as well. Hafsa and Sondos, it’d be great to hear about your experiences. Was it just something that was expected of you or did you make a conscious decision to do it?  |
| Hafsa | So I never wore the hijab until I was 22 years because where I come from, India, which is very diverse in terms of religious acceptance, it wasn’t really forced on me as well. My mum and my dad didn’t want me to wear the hijab when I chose to wear it at 22 because they believed it might hinder and create more obstacles for me in life but being the rebel that I am in my family, I decided that I was going to do that anyways.  |
| Sally | I really like that: I’m a rebel so I’m going to wear the hijab.  |
| Hafsa | See, you can be a rebel in many ways! I just decided I wanted to wear it. I had finished my graduation, I was going to enter the workforce and I wanted to stand up for who I am in terms of my religious identity and be proud of what I am. I don’t want to hide it; like Qaali said, it gives us a sense of power that we are Muslim women. Women carry the symbol of Muslim identity, it is very hard for you to find men out there and tell who is Muslim and who is not a Muslim, it comes with its responsibilities in terms of the values that you stand for.  |
| Sondos | I wore my hijab at a very young age. Most people would be quite shocked, I wore it at 10 years old which isn’t an age that’s expected of a woman. For me I really wanted to wear it. When I wore my hijab my brother had only recently passed away, it was two days after he had passed away, he was 15 at the time, and for me his death was kind of a wake up call. He was 15 and I was just thinking to myself if he had passed away at the age of 15, what was guaranteeing that I would like any longer and I wanted to live my life knowing that I’m doing everything that I can and I’m also pleasing God. I grew up loving the hijab, my mum is a hijabi, most of my aunts and family are hijabis, and I always admired it on my mother. I remembered growing up and I’d always put the hijab on my head and my mum would just laugh at me and be like, don’t be silly. When I finally decided to wear it I told my parents and they weren’t against it, they just wanted the decision to come fully from me and when they realised how serious I was about it, they were like, “OK wear it and at any point if you feel uncomfortable, it’s your decision.” So I wore it and I can honestly say, nine years on, that it was the most conscious decision I’ve made and one decision that I will never regret. There’s never been a point in my life, even through my hardships, that I have been like, I don’t want to wear this hijab anymore. It’s become who I am. If anything, I became more confident after the hijab. I’m not me, I’m not Sondos, without the hijab.  |
| Qaali | I’m really proud of you and especially being young in this country and going to school and doing sports. I can understand because young women in New Zealand who wants to fulfil their dreams and hopes and be the same individuals that anyone else feels, have to do it and I understand what it is like and I am so proud of you.  |
| Denise | I think it is really commendable. You are making a really visual statement, that you are proud to be a Muslim. Anybody born, say, two years before or after 9/11 have grown up with the culture of Islam being the bad people, the terrorists. Before then they were just people who had nice food and wore lots of clothes. But there has been constant bad media and so young people might grow up and they might have internalised negative feelings about Islam and so they might have this internalised Islamophobia and so for young people to be proud of who they are, to be so strong at such a young age, I just really admire all young people who are out there showing that they are not afraid of what the media says about them and they are saying this is who I am and I am a valuable, contributing member of society.  |
| Sondos | I think also for a lot of us youth in New Zealand and just in the world as Muslims, wearing the hijab… For me, I see it as a tool. It’s a tool for me to highlight to the world that this is who Muslims are and this is what we believe. I strive every day to show people that my hijab doesn’t restrict me. I do pretty much everything that anyone else does and I do it with the same dignity and pride and that Islam is what we say it is, Islam does mean peace, it does mean compassion, it does mean family and unity and all the things that our religion preaches and by wearing my hijab and hopefully showing these characteristics, I’m at least changing one person’s perspective on what the religion is and allowing them to go and read up on it because honestly, it is ignorance that breeds hatred and that’s something that we all need combat in our own way.  |
| Qaali | And also the lack of education makes people think the worst of everything. Young people in New Zealand, they might have their hardships and they go through a lot of stuff but they still stay strong for their beliefs. As a mum, I really, really encourage everyone, whether you are Muslim or non-Muslim: Follow your dreams and don’t let anyone else change how you are and who you are and stay individuality because no-one can change that except you and don’t listen to what someone else says. Believe in yourself.  |
| Hafsa | And just to add on to what Sondos said, wearing the hijab in no way means oppression. We are not oppressed. If you look at the four of us, we are in no way oppressed, and it goes for a lot of people in the community. There is no way we would feel oppressed by wearing a hijab; we do everything that anyone else would do. Wearing a hijab doesn’t mean we are restricted from participating in sports, now there is so much more accommodation for people who wear hijab and they go into sports. So we are not oppressed women! |
| Qaali | Muslim women actually are very well respected; the woman has the power actually. Without Muslim women in our households the house wouldn’t run and the husband wouldn’t do his job without a good wife.  |
| Sally | You have two daughters, how old are they?  |
| Qaali | I have three daughters, my eldest is 21, she is doing her second year of psychology and my other daughter is in her last year of high school and almost 18. My youngest is six.  |
| Sally | Of your three daughters, do they all wear the hijab?  |
| Qaali | My older two wear the hijab and this is going to bring me to tears. My eldest daughter, she started wearing hijab when she was five years old. One day she just came in the house and said I want to wear a hijab and at that time I was like, “Really?” She said yes. In my head I was like, “Where can I get a hijab, a little hijab for a little girl because she’s going to school and will the school accept what I do?” and ever since she has never taken it off. She has chosen that. And my other daughter, she did the same. I would actually say because she went to a Muslim school for preschool that she saw everyone else was the same as her, thinking about what they were doing, playing with all of her friends so that gives her hope, that it’s actually normal and she played netball, she wears hijab and it was really hard for me because I have to tell the school that my daughter can’t wear shorts, can she wear leggings which is the middle of the winter time and I don’t know why they have that tiny skirt! All her team end up wearing the legging, that’s how much support she got.  |
| Denise | Can I just pick on something that you said that because she went to a Muslim childcare centre and she saw that wearing a hijab was normal and that really empowered her. I think that’s quite good that we have more hijab-wearing Muslims in visible places of work. I had an experience about a year ago when a husband and a wife came in, the wife spoke very little English and she was about to start the main course next Monday and you could tell that she was really, really nervous and her husband had come to check out the situation and they were wearing very westernised clothes - they had a sweatshirt and a pair of trousers on. And I chatted, I said, “The teacher is wonderful, don’t worry, this is what will happen, I’ll be there on the first day.” When she came on the first day she was wearing a hijab without anybody saying anything. Then when I saw her two or three days later, she was wearing clothes that I would say come from her own country because she saw other people saying it’s OK to be who you are and by wearing our hijab or people wearing the clothes that they feel comfortable with from their own country, it’s a visual symbol of it’s OK to celebrate who you are.  |
| Qaali | Yes that is true, if you don’t have a strong will and you didn’t have support behind you and with the school support that’s the truth. Wherever she went she saw me, friends and all that things she grow up with gives her the sense of belonging and sense of identity and also stand up for what she believes. Really young women in New Zealand who are Muslim to stand up for what they believe and don’t let anyone else make a judgement. Please, for whoever it is, please don’t judge a book by it’s cover. Just ask us a question! If you want to know something without anything just ask us and say why are you wearing and we might tell you.  |
| Sally | Conversely, if a Muslim woman chooses not to wear the hijab, is that the same thing?  |
| Sondos | The thing about religion, it’s a choice. There is no aspect of the Qur’an that says you can force anything upon anyone. There are values and obligations set out in Islam but then it’s up to you to decide whether you’re going to commit to them or not. The same goes for your prayers, fasting, going to Hajj. Everyone has their personal hardships with religion, some people struggle to pray, some people struggle to wear the hijab. For me I don’t see hijabi women and feel like she is lesser than me, and I don’t see hijabi women wearing a niqab or a burka or dressed more modestly than me and think oh she’s better than me. Religion is a personal thing and at the end of the day, no person is better than another person based on how they dress or how they choose to partake in their religious activities or whether they choose to pray. Once you take the choice away in religion, that’s when it becomes oppression. The same way you can force someone to wear the hijab, that’s oppression. The same way you take away that choice, you tell someone to take it off, that’s oppression. I chose this hijab and that’s what is liberating for me. So for you to tell me not to wear it, you’re taking away that choice and you’re taking away that liberation that I felt for so many years. For a lot of people, they see the hijab and they see a woman fully covered and they think, “Oh she is oppressed, it must be so hard for her.” As much as I respect women that dress the way they want or wear tight clothing or whatever, that’s not for me, the same way that what I wear isn’t for them, that’s their choice. And that’s where the liberation comes from and that’s how we empower women and we empower men to feel like I am liberated. We live in a country that gives us rights to choose what we want to do and freedom of speech and freedom of action. It shouldn’t really affect anyone what another person chooses to do.  |
| Denise | Sometimes there are cases that women are forced to wear a hijab. If it’s a parent or parents trying to guide their children, parents try to guide their children on many things and many parents have different rules in their house like you can’t smoke or drink alcohol and that’s a parent trying to guide a child. However, if a woman is forced to wear her hijab then it actually I think might do more harm than good because it’s taking away her possibility of this being her choice that strengthens her relationship with Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta’ala [Glory to him the exalted]. If it is a very conscious thing, she has probably prayed about it, she’s worked it out as a spiritual choice. That means she probably can withstand any of the problems that come with it because it’s deepening her spiritual connection. If it’s forced on from the top, especially for adult women, then they’re not going to get all the wonderful payback you get when it’s a form of worship, they’re just going to possibly get some hardship. So I disagree with women being forced to wear it.  |
| Qaali | This takes all the trust that the individual has because if you force somebody to wear something while you are around they might put it on. You go outside, especially young people, before they reach the gate of the school they take it off. A person doubts themselves, you’re not teaching that person what trust looks like. For me, I tell my children or whoever is around me, please don’t fear about me, fear about God because he is the one who is around you all the time no matter where you hide; if you are lying, he knows where you are. I can’t guide the kids 24 hours; you have to teach for individuals to not fear.  |
| Denise | I think that’s a good example. I know when I was at high school, there were some more religious parents who wanted their girls to wear longer skirts and so they’d go out of the door and the skirt would be long and then when they got to the school, they’d be in the toilets winding up the skirt to make it shorter and putting on the lipsticks. When they got home they’d pull the skirt down. So you’re right, you have to let it be a person’s choice.  |
| Hafsa | In our country, people would wear the full niqab going back to high school and college so they could sneak out with their boyfriends and nobody would identify them and that freaked my parents out, that’s why they never wanted me to do that. Touching back on what Qaali said, it is about submission. If I submit and that’s the stage I accept that I have built a connection with my Lord through that submission. Once I do that, I know that that connection is there and I would probably not want to break that connection. By forcing a connection, it’s never going to happen. It happens when it happens in the heart.  |
| Denise | When I decided to wear the hijab - and it was while we were still having all those earthquakes and still boiling water and all the things that went on - I had a personal conversation with Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta’ala and I said, “Look, I’m not ready or strong enough for any bad statements or any hassle about me wearing this, I’ve got no strength left. I’m wearing this for you, you have to make it really, really easy for me until I am ready for any discrimination.” And really, for the first six months, it was all so easy. Then the ground stopped shaking, the water was OK, the job was more secure and it wasn’t until after quite a significant period of time that I felt better and my first lot of what I would call direct discrimination because of the hijab. So I think it’s about having that strong connection.  |
| Sally | Denise, I’d like to pick up that point of discrimination. We’re just going to have our next song and then we’ll get into some of the more negative experiences you guys might have had.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY LLYAS MAO & CASTILLO NASHEEDS - WONDERS** |
| Sally  | Nau mai, nau mai. This is “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia” and we’re talking about wearing the hijab. Denise, we finished off that last segment just touching on the idea of discrimination. It’s not something I want to focus on because this is a positive discussion but I think it is nonetheless important that we touch on the fact that it can’t be easy for you all the time wearing the hijab in New Zealand. I’ll just leave it at that.  |
| Denise | I did a study - it was part of a bigger study about teaching Muslim students - but one of the questions I asked was had women had negative experiences from wearing a hijab, and 58% of the people had had some kind of negative experience and that was from people insulting them behind their back up until someone trying to physically remove the hijab. Thankfully that was only 6% but that’s still a reasonable number. What I thought was really the more worrying statistic was that 22% had been encouraged to take it off and another 6% had been directly asked to take it off. People often encouraged to take it off by teachers, by guidance counsellors in their place of study or in their place of work. Saying to the young women who are already very vulnerable as a teenager or someone trying to enter the workplace: please take this off and your life will be easier. Or, please wear a more fashionable style like a turban or show more hair because that’s more acceptable.  |
| Sally | That’s so ironic, isn’t it, because you’ve just been talking about how it gives us identity, it gives us power, it gives us strength - exactly what you need if you’re going through periods of uncertainty like trying to get a new job.  |
| Sondos | I’ve personally experienced discrimination from my hijab quite a few times. I had my hijab ripped off my head when I was 13 and it was by another kid in my school and he did eventually apologise but having my hijab ripped off my head was something that was really weird for me because having someone touch you without your consent in any way is something that is very weird and not OK at all but for something so personal and something that I’ve tried so hard to convince people that I love, it was just really hard for me and at that point I realised I wasn’t going to try and convince people anymore. This is me and if you have any questions you can ask them. It’s about respecting people’s personal boundaries. Multiple times I’ve been walking in the street and I’ve had people verbally harass me, attack me about my religion, about my Prophet. I’ve reached a point now where whenever someone I don’t know approaches my family, I get defensive, I have a guard up expecting something to happen. I remember one time my mum and I were walking out of the mall and there was this woman who followed us and I went to put the trolley back in its place and I saw her approaching my mum. I ran over just in time to hear a woman praising my mum and telling her, “I love seeing you wear your hijab and it’s so beautiful and never take it off, we love having you in New Zealand.” This was before 15 March. And so to have someone come and approach my mother like that, it gave me some peace of mind that no matter where you go there will always be racism - and we’re always going to experience it whether it’s in the workforce, in a school or just in your day-to-day life - but there’s also so many good and supportive people and Kiwis, at the heart of it, they’re simple, compassionate, kind people and I’m not going to let one negative experience highlight something so much bigger. It is important to recognise that racism is prominent in New Zealand and something needs to be done about it; just because it’s on a smaller scale doesn’t mean it’s not there and it doesn’t mean it can’t be spoken about. 15 March in itself shows us that we need to do something about it.  |
| Denise | The first time that I was directly insulted was a very interesting experience for me. I was at a bus stop waiting for my bus and somebody went past and it was a generic insult, it was “Go back to where you came from.” I looked around the bus stop for the person who I should be supporting that was not a New Zealander - because I feel like a New Zealander, I was born here - and so when I saw that there was no obvious foreigner at the bus stop and one of my friends at the bus stop said, “Oh does that happen a lot to you?” I thought, “Oh they’re talking to me! They want *me* to go home.” What I’ve noticed over the seven years is that the insults that I get at bus stops or on public transport, they’re far more targeted now and they’re far more violent and they’re threatening things like to kill my family or rape, I’ve been spat at, I’ve had mime shooting me or slitting my throat and this has got worse over the last seven years.  |
| Sally | That’s disgusting.  |
| Denise | I’ve been asked for my passport on a domestic flight, I’ve been thrown off a bus and I know if I were not wearing a hijab, these experiences would not happen to me.  |
| Qaali | I have been really blessed, I haven’t had any really bad experience but my daughters have experienced really, really hard time especially after March. Women actually stood out, men don’t stand out, women stand out because they wear the hijab and straight away everybody can see you are Muslim. There is no way for you to hide and we don’t want to hide. My daughters and her friends were in the mall and her friends have been bashed and her blood was all on the ground and my daughter was like, I didn’t understand. For me it is like, I was born in Christchurch Hospital and how you tell me to go back to where you came from, I have the same right as you do. I know so many families that have hard time that have been knocked on their houses, called names, neighbours don’t do anything and somebody who is standing beside them don’t do anything and the thing is as a woman, you need to protect yourself and the thing that I want to say for them is no matter what it is, hold onto your belief and hold onto your religion and do not let these arrogant people take away your dignity because this is who we are.  |
| Hafsa | Contrary to everyone’s experience, in the past 12 years I’ve had mostly positive experiences in the jobs that I have done where people have appreciated me for being who I am. For me, I think it also is about you respecting them for who they are at that point in time, at that first interaction. And I feel blessed to have been brought up in India because we are so diverse in terms of religions there that when I grew up in school I had people from Hinduism to Christianity to Judaism to you name any religion in the world, I have studied with them and I have grown up with them and in schools we learnt about everybody’s religion; it was part of our curriculum. It is about teaching it at that young age where you understand that people can be different. I just want to conclude with one example from my daughter’s preschool. She came back one day and said oh one of my friends, she said that because I am brown I can’t be a princess. Disney plays a big role here and Disney has got to redefine what a princess is.  |
| Qaali | There is a brown princess now.  |
| Denise | I think that we have to redefine what a princess is but we also have to redefine what the villain is because often pop culture over the last few years the villain has generally been the Muslim. When I grew up, the villain was the communist and now the villain is the Muslim. So we do have to not subtly change people’s way of thinking through our children’s programmes and our pop culture. We have to show the wide diversity - that princesses and villains come in many shapes and sizes - and if someone is having some kind of harassment in a public place, it is up to the people who are standing around to stand with them, to do something to support them.  |
| Sondos | Like you were saying, sometimes the racism, as upsetting as it is, it’s not as upsetting as the silences. The silence is the most deafening thing. In schools, I remember growing up, they used to teach us all the time about bullying and awareness for bullying and standing up to bullies and supporting people who are being bullied. The same applies to racism: racism completely changes people and it really puts them in their shells. Kids can’t go to school knowing they’re going to be harassed and if they are harassed for the way they look or their beliefs or the way they dress, at least we know there are people out there that are going to make sure that they’re OK and that are going to stand up for them because that is what it’s about. If we’re going to combat racism, we have to stand up for each other.  |
| Qaali | You have to think about it because you have daughters, you have sons. What’s the moral aspect that you are teaching our kids, what’s the moral that you are after for your children. I believe racism starts from inside the house. If the child was taught to have respect for individuality when they go outside the house. For me, I tell my kids you have to have respect for every religion. For example, I don’t celebrate Christmas but I tell my children be respectful because this is what it is. As a human being nurture comes from kindness. If you want to nurture somebody, there’s food and things but kind words go a long way.  |
| Hafsa | It begins at ground level, grassroots level, and it is about teaching your kids that the values are important. It’s alright for people to be of different religions, look different, wear different clothes. Values are important and when that happens you will see a lot of change happen in society. One of the leaders that we follow says that people are either your brothers in fate or your equals in humanity. So if they are your equals in humanity you have no right to treat them disrespectfully.  |
| Denise | I think it’s celebrating the diversity and recognising the humanity in everybody. One of the distressing things that I read that quite upset me when I did my study was the number of people who were encouraged to modify their hijab to be a little bit more fashionable to show more hair and, “Could you please wear it so you’re a little less Islamic, so you’re a little less Muslim in the workplace.” That’s like looking at somebody and saying, “Could you be a little less black or could you be a little less disabled or could you be a little less Asian?” and underlying that, “Could you be a little bit more like me.?” I’m fine the way I am, but you’re fine the way you are as well and it’s acknowledging the value of ourselves and the value of other people and not wanting everybody to be this grey faceless no variety kind of person.  |
| Qaali | Life would be so boring if everything was the same. |
| Sally | Just to touch on what you mentioned, Denise, the idea of hijabi fashion. We’ve got four of you here in the studio and you’re all wearing the hijab in different ways and that is so cool. I just love it. Can you choose how you want to wear it; do you deliberately style it to match your outfit?  |
| Sondos | I mean definitely, I think obviously again fashion is a personal choice. Some people like leopard prints, other people don’t. The same applies to the way you dress. Some women when they wear the hijab, they don’t like it to be a fashion statement, some women wear all black, some women wear what we call a jilbab, it was a long modest dress which doesn’t show any curves or anything like that. Generally in Islam a woman is meant to hide the curves of her body and just dress modestly in the greater sense but there is nothing wrong with styling your hijab to fit your outfit. Generally your hijab has to obviously cover your hair and neck and chest. Some women choose to wear their turban and that’s completely fine, it suits a lot of women, they look absolutely beautiful. There’s nothing in Islam that says that you can’t dress to look good. You have to be presentable; Islam prides itself on looking good and smelling good and staying clean. Men are asked before their Friday prayers to take a shower, wear perfume, cut their nails and cutting your nails is actually even a *Sunnah* which is one of the actions that the Prophet used to do and so we follow, peace be upon him. So like I said, dressing well and being comfortable and even if it turns out to be a fashion statement that’s absolutely fine.  |
| Denise | Over the years I debated whether or not to wear a hijab, one of the things that stopped me… Initially in New Zealand you could get only the large square type of hijab made of a very shiny material, that is just a disaster waiting to happen if you’re putting on your hijab for the first time as an adult because you scratch your head with the pins, it falls off. Thankfully now there are rectangular ones made of cotton and I choose my style because it takes 20 seconds to put on in the morning. In the beginning I watched a video and it took the woman 15 minutes to put on this work of art and I thought, “Seriously, 15 minutes?!” I’ve had my shower, eaten my breakfast and I’m at the bus stop in that 15 minutes. So for me it’s about practicality. I think a lot of the fashion companies, really the big names like Yves Saint Laurent and Nike and Mango and Tommy Hilfiger, have realised that there are a lot of young educated Muslim women on very good incomes so there’s this untapped market. I think one of the estimations is it’s worth like $57 billion. So they see it as a way of selling product; they don’t really care about Muslim women’s identity. So some of the women who wear hijab on the catwalk or on the runway, I don’t consider it to be a hijab, I consider it to be a scarf because the woman is not a Muslim and the woman is not wearing it to do with worship and the woman is not wearing it to do with her connection with Allah, she is doing it because the stylist or fashion designer told her to wear it. So it’s OK to look beautiful and it’s OK to wear nice clothes if you want to wear nice clothes but I think Muslim women need to realise that there are companies that aren’t looking at our emancipation or our liberty as women, they’re looking at the dollars in our pocket and that’s what it’s about.  |
| Qaali | Especially young people if you are raising daughters, it’s really nice to see the fashion that they wear is out there rather than looking at the bikinis. If she wants to be a designer and she can design all this. In a way it actually gives some beneficial for young women because that’s what she likes and for her it’s like, how can I be fashion if my fashion is not selling. For me, I actually believe it is giving opportunity for young Muslim women to follow her dreams and what she is passionate about.  |
| Denise | Especially if it is Muslim women designing for Muslim women.  |
| Qaali | Yes but if you see other companies doing it, these Muslim women are like, I can actually make my own Muslim modesty way of designing what I want and for young women who has grown up in western countries, it gives them a choice to buy the colour they like, what they like and see OK, I can support that person but if it didn’t exist and there is no other things, you wouldn’t have anyone selling it.  |
| Hafsa | So that is what the potential is, that there is a market out there and everybody wants to tap into that market. At the core of it, it is a need. Younger generations want that because they want the ability to choose. I just probably try, like sister Denise said, two minutes for my hijab. But for younger generations having that choice is also about acceptance. The companies are appreciating that we exist, the whole identity idea. Up until now nobody looked at the hijab, they always thought that Muslim women, “Oh they wear these boring scarves, anyone can just buy a piece of cloth and make a hijab out of it” but now they’re seeing that, “Oh actually, there’s a market that we need to tap into and it’s good.” In a way…. I’d like my daughter to have that accessibility and the appreciation in the market that she has the opportunity to choose something that she likes and not being forced to wear something like me.  |
| Sondos | I think it is good to have those options available to us and it does make life easier knowing that wherever I go I can find something to wear that fits my modesty and my hijab. It is also important for these businesses and companies to realise that the hijab isn’t a fashion statement, that when it is presented it should be presented in a way that we believe it should be. It’s kind of odd sometimes seeing the hijab being worn…. she’s wearing it properly and then she’s wearing a really short dress, because it gives the wrong impression of the hijab. While I respect everyone trying their best to incorporate the Muslim values and ideas into their fashion and or into their business ideas or accommodate to us, it’s important to go the full length and properly understand it and commit to it.  |
| Denise | Some of the fashion designers present it in a way and there’s mixed messages because there is a hijab but it’s slightly orientalised and it’s sexualised and I don’t think you can actually combine a highly sexualised woman and a statement of worship. You also have to look at the whole ethical consumption because we’re supposed to be ethical in our consumption, we’re not supposed to consume too much and buy too many products as another part of our religion. So I agree with you; it’s great that there’s more choice but I like the Muslim women who have their own companies and they have ethical consumption so they are not sacrificing one part of our religion just to sell a product.  |
| Hafsa | So it’s a lot about picking and choosing. If you want to pick it up, pick it up as a whole don’t just pick parts of it and try to represent us. That’s what I think we’re trying to say.  |
| Sally | Perfect, we might end it there. I’d like to say thank you so, so much for coming in and sharing. You’ve all spoken so beautifully and eloquently and I’m sure everybody listening has learnt a lot. Sondos, you were saying about your experiences in the mall, the woman coming over and talking to your mum. Maybe we should all take that kind of message home with us today, why don’t you just go and talk to someone, ask them questions. If you are interested, I’m sure you guys and anyone else wearing a hijab would be willing to talk about it and why you are doing it.  |
| All | Definitely. |
| Sondos | Go out of your way to compliment someone.  |
| Qaali | My culture include in our curriculum, my language and what it is and where I come from and last week they celebrate end of Ramadan so that actually shows the children that it’s really important for everybody to help each other.  |
| Hafsa | It is about building connections to build on. |
| Denise | Standing up for each other |