

headscarves and generational conflict

Conflict between immigrant parents and their children who were born or raised in the United States is a recurrent theme in the study of immigrant adaptation. Parents often fear that their children are assimilating to American culture too rapidly as they attempt to fit in with their peers and conform to media images. Yet parents may also become concerned when their children choose to publicly express their ethnic and religious roots, risking possible ostracism and discrimination. The result in either case is conflict between the generations.

Today, second-generation Muslim American youth are asserting their Islamic identity through their dress, behavior, and organizational affiliations. In the conversation that follows, Leila, a 21-year-old daughter of Pakistani immigrants, discusses how she and her family reacted in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Leila was raised in New York City, where she currently resides.

Lori: *How did your family respond to you immediately following the September 11 attacks?*

Leila: When the whole thing happened, after two hours I'm getting phone calls from my relatives saying that I should take off my headscarf. Saying, "No way in hell. You shouldn't even go out. Take off your headscarf. You're going to get yourself killed." I'm like, "What are you talking about?" My relatives were giving lectures to my parents and telling them, "You should stop your daughter from wearing a headscarf." I'm the only child living with my mom and dad right now. They were like, "No way. No headscarf." I said, "What about a hat? Jewish women wear hats." They just said, "No way."

Lori: *Did your parents want you to stop wearing your headscarf permanently?*

Leila: No, not permanently. But right after September 11, we kept receiving all these reports about women being spit on or beat up in the subways. Some minorities were even killed. We would have a lot of conflict in the house, but my parents just kept saying, "No way. Maybe after everyone has calmed down you can start wearing it again." But right after September 11, things were just so sad and so tense in the city. They were still searching for people at Ground Zero.

Lori: *Did you stop wearing a headscarf like your parents asked you to do?*

Leila: For a few days. But I couldn't not wear it. It was so easy for my parents to say take it off because they think it is just a piece of clothing on your head. My mom doesn't wear

it; my sister doesn't wear it. I am the only one in the family who wears the headscarf, so I got a lot of resistance when I started covering in the first place. But what they don't understand is, after you go through this whole process of deciding to cover, you get used to it. It becomes a part of your body, your identity, of who you are. It's like telling someone else to take off their pants. I was like, I can't stop wearing it. It is part of my identity, of who I am. I felt naked without it. So, they didn't know, but I started wearing it behind their backs. I would go to school, put it on, and then take it off when I would leave campus.

Lori: *How would they react if they knew you were wearing it against their wishes?*

Leila: They would be very sad. My parents had never butted into my life before, but after September 11, I had to tell them everything. I used to hang out with the other girls at school and do all kinds of things. But after September 11, I just had to run home. I realize my mother and father asked me to remove my *hijab* for safety reasons. They knew that people were angry and upset and that Muslim women are very visible targets. But it was hard. If I wanted to go out, the questions always came. "Where are you going?" "Shopping." "You can't go shopping." Don't do this alone. Don't do that alone. Don't go buy milk. It was a whole new change. I felt like I was homebound. Trapped. School was my only way out.

Lori: *How did you feel when you were wearing the headscarf behind their backs?*

Leila: When September 11 happened, my reaction during the first few weeks was just intense sadness. Sadness and, I guess, some fear. I have always liked America and felt comfortable here. But after the attacks I began to feel like I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere. I was taking my headscarf on and off, having a lot of problems with my family. I could not even express myself. This is my identity. I wear my headscarf because I want people to look at me and be like, "Wow, that's a Muslim girl, and she can have fun with

her life." You know how people believe that women in Islam are oppressed, that they cannot do things? I've been trying to prove it to people. I ride on a jet ski, go ice skating, I can even play miniature golf. I'm horrible at it, but I can do it. After I had to take off my headscarf, when I would do something, I wouldn't look Muslim. I got my hair cut really short, and I dyed it too. I looked horrible. I looked like ... you know how you go through a desert storm and you haven't washed your hair for such a long time? [Laughs] I was really depressed during that time.

Lori: *Did others encourage you to remove your headscarf?*

Leila: In the building where we live, the superintendent also told me that I shouldn't wear a headscarf. Right after the attacks he said to me, "Don't wear it for a few months." I said, "Are you with my parents, a conspiracy or something?" [Laughs]

Other than that incident, it was mostly my relatives who were giving me problems, but they always had issues with me covering. They've always asked me, "Why are you wearing a headscarf? You have it in your heart." I'm like, "This is part of the religion." It says you have to be modest. My relatives, the ones who still live in Pakistan, they came here to visit us. My aunt, when she saw me, she pulled my headscarf up and was like, "What are you doing? You shouldn't be doing that." I was just ignoring her. My cousins were here too. One of them asked why I don't wear more fashionable clothes. She kept commenting that my clothes were too loose, wanting me to dress in a certain way. I just told them all to leave me alone. I couldn't believe my own relatives would have that mentality. I don't know where they get this idea that the only important thing is to look stylish. They kept telling me how old I look with the headscarf. Instead of telling me I am doing a good job, doing something good for my religion. No. It's more like, "Why? Why are you doing this to yourself?" There are also a few members of my family who have decided I represent the whole Muslim community. They're always asking me what I think

about this or that.

Lori: *When did you begin wearing a headscarf again in front of your family?*

Leila: My parents wanted me to stop wearing it until things cooled down, but it seemed like nothing was cooling down. There continues to be so much focus on Muslims and Islam. So I guess it was about six months after September 11, I was like, forget it. I got sick of hiding this behind my parents' backs. One day I just got up, and I wore a headscarf in front of my dad. I was like, "You know what? Today's Friday. Why don't you go and pray in the mosque? I'm going to school." And I just left. He was like, "Huh?" He hasn't even mentioned it or said anything. Sometimes I call him when I'm going home late and say, "Listen, I don't want you to get worried. I'm going to be home at this certain time."

Lori: *Did you feel better once you were able to start wearing a headscarf again?*

"I got sick of hiding this behind my parents' backs. One day I just got up, and I wore a headscarf in front of my dad."

Leila: Things started really getting back to normal. My parents weren't getting as upset about me and what I was wearing. A lot of the tension around the house, between my family and me, it started to go away, so that's a good thing. But, some things haven't totally changed. Every time

something happens, with Afghanistan or the war in Iraq, my parents, as usual, are like, "Why don't you take your headscarf off?" When I go home there's a whole big debate, but now I just ignore them. I've come up with this whole new technique of listening. I'm always like, "Yeah, you're right." And then I do what I want to do. For me personally, I feel like I'm becoming the same person I was before September 11. I'm getting back to where I was. It's just going to take me some time to have the same courage.

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Percent of Americans who would prefer to die at home	73
Percent of Americans who die in a hospital	71