



# Bringing the hijab into the mainstream

Not only is Nike's Pro Hijab taking on Islamophobia and patriarchy, it's making sport accessible

**NURAAAN DAVIDS**

IN March, when sports manufacturer Nike launched the Nike Pro Hijab, it made obvious business sense. What Nike, perhaps inadvertently, has done, is to legitimise the hijab across two very different narratives.

One is in response to hostile liberal democracies that are adamant about modernising Muslim women by stripping them of their hijab. The other is in response to some interpretations of Islam which consider the traditional dress and role of Muslim women as irreconcilable with modern sport.

Nike has countered the position of liberal democracies because, implicit in its action is that if Muslim women are supported in wearing the hijab while playing sport, what can be so wrong about it being worn in other contexts?

By introducing the Pro Hijab, Nike is legitimising the wearing of the hijab by Muslim women in sport, and it's also legitimising the hijab in public spaces.

The preoccupation of liberal democracies to regulate the dress code of Muslim women, such as banning the hijab in public spaces, has added to the vulnerability of Muslim women. What liberal democracies demand of them is to unveil so they are publicly acceptable.

In these countries, the hijab is designated as a symbol and image of oppression and backwardness. Sports sociologist Jennifer Hargreaves writes in her book *Heroines of Sport: The politics of difference and identity* (2000): "The veil is a symbol of cultural difference. For non-Muslims it conveys the idea that Western women are liberated, and Muslim women, by comparison, are oppressed. The veil represents the 'otherness' of Islam and is condemned in the West as a constricting mode of dress, a form of social control, and a religious sanctioning of women's invisibility and subordinate sociopolitical status."

Secondly, what Nike has done is to counter the Muslim patriarchal view that justifies the relegation of Muslim women to the private space. They do this on the basis that women's participation in the public domain necessarily compromises their modesty and values. In recognising Muslim women's participation in sport, the Pro Hijab has symbolically placed the role of the Muslim female body in the public sphere. But sport transcends the boundaries of geographical and political spaces. It has both the means and the end of bringing together different ways of thinking, being and competing. Sport cuts across culture, religion and language like no other industry.

**MUSLIM WOMEN AND**



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**PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

High-end designer names such as Oscar de la Renta, Dolce & Gabbana, Versace and DKNY, already tap into a formerly untraversed market of Muslim money, epitomised by the wealth found in the Gulf region. In this sense, Nike's latest clothing attire has been dismissed as nothing but opportunistic.

Nike's hijab has been welcomed by some — mostly Muslim women. But it's also been criticised harshly for endorsing the oppression of women. Criticism on social media has promoted tweets of dissent with the hashtag

#BoycottNike.

But lost in this discontent are three significant facts and factors. Firstly, the participation of Muslim women in sport is not new. Secondly, Muslim women who participate in sport and who wish to maintain an Islamic dress code, as in wearing the hijab, have already done so. Thirdly, the impression that Nike is the first to promote a hijab aimed at athletes, is misplaced. The first person to design and market an athletic hijab was Dutch designer Cindy van den Bremen in 1999. Today, smaller companies like Van den Bre-

men's Capsters, Canadian-based ResportOn, as well Muslim-owned companies, have been selling sports hijabs all over the world. In fact, a hijab design by ResportOn was one of the reasons that the International Taekwondo Federation allowed Muslim women to compete in recognised tournaments.

Both Capster and ResportOn submitted prototypes that overturned FIFA's hijab ban in 2014. These companies carved out a space for Muslim women when their participation was challenged. Nike's introduction of the Pro Hijab, therefore, is not a ground-

breaking endeavour. But what Nike has achieved in promoting its Pro Hijab, is that a global brand has mainstreamed what is generally considered an oppressive and marginalised garment. Within a context of intensifying Islamophobia directed at Muslim women, it's inconceivable that Nike would not have expected the political and social backlash. Indeed, the controversy might be the best marketing for the latest Nike product. — The Conversation. Nuraan Davids is an associate professor of philosophy of education, Stellenbosch University.

