

The women who wear the veil

While politicians call for a debate on whether women should be allowed to wear the niqab, some of those who choose to tell **Emily Dugan** why it is so important to them



'Why it is so important for us to wear the veil'

Calls for a debate by politicians on wearing a niqab has put their choice under intense scrutiny over the last few days

Emily Dugan



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The niqab risks becoming a cause célèbre When Birmingham community worker Shalina Litt steps out in her niqab, she has come to expect the worst. "It gets a really bad reaction," the 34 year-old mother of two says. "I've had glass kicked at me and when you drive people are extra aggressive. They will roll down their window to shout at you."

Amongst the 1.4 million Muslim women in Britain, Shalina is one of a tiny minority who choose to cover their face entirely. This choice has come under intense scrutiny over the last few days, after a judge ruled that a 22-year-old woman from Hackney, East London, could not wear the full veil while being cross-examined in court.

Making the ruling in Blackfriars Crown Court in London, Judge Peter Murphy said the niqab had "become the elephant in the courtroom" because the judiciary was increasingly unsure how to deal with it. His ruling has reignited national debate about the acceptability of face coverings such as the niqab, where a narrow slit for the eyes is all that can be seen of a woman's face.

Shalina says it is at times like this when hatred of covered-up women becomes most heated. "You know when Islam has been in the media because just driving around you find that people are very aggressive," she says. "It was really noticeable after the Woolwich attack [in which Lee Rigby was murdered], and it is happening again now, with niqabs in the media. It stirs these anti-Islamic feelings up to the surface.

"I do understand why people are intimidating. If you've never met a woman in a face veil and have only experienced it through the media then you already have a preconceived idea and people have their guard up."

For Shalina, the choice is a religious one and she is the only member of her family to wear the face veil. She started wearing it around four years ago as part of taking her Muslim faith more seriously. "I see it as an act of modesty that's pleasing to my lord," she says.

"Some people pray more or fast more and I just cover more. I'm not dressed to please people, I'm dressed to please my lord. When you think of a woman in a niqab you think of an extremist, but it's just a spiritual thing."

Unlike some who wear the niqab, Shalina does not feel obliged to keep it on at all non-family occasions. She explains: "Nobody is forcing me to do it and I can lift it up at any time. When I see my elderly white neighbour, I make sure I lift it

up and show her my face. I actually find it cooler to wear on a hot day, but if it's uncomfortable or I've got a cold and I'm bunged up, I'm not going to wear it. It's a religious choice.

"I don't wear it when I'm working in schools and I wouldn't wear it in an area where I know people won't understand. If I went to visit family in Northampton I wouldn't wear it because people wouldn't understand there and it wouldn't be worth the hassle."

Shalina, who has two young children, says she would be happy for her daughter to wear a veil, but that it would be her choice. "It's a very liberating and empowering experience. I'm not oppressed by ageism, sexism or racism because nobody can see."

Most Islamic scholars agree that there is no scripture which says the niqab is compulsory for women, but some see it as an admirable act of additional piety. The wives of the prophet Mohammed are supposed to have covered their faces, but the Quran also makes it clear that they are not like any other women.

Often confused with the burqa, the niqab is simply a covering for the face, whereas the burqa masks the face and body. The Islamic Establishment is one of the UK's main niqab retailers and estimates it sells around 50 a week to women around Britain. It's an online Islamic clothing and accessories shop, with a separate Leicester store.

It stocks eight different types of the full face veil, with a baffling array of styles for a piece of black cloth, including elasticated, tie back, soft touch and velcro, each costing between £3 and £10.

Farhana, a 39-year-old mother of four from Leicester who wears the niqab, said: "I was born and brought up here. I love this country and I love the principle of treating everyone as an equal. My veil doesn't stop me from being an active British citizen."

"I feel it is my responsibility, for example, to look after the homeless, whatever their faith. I have helped set up a drop-in service for them every Saturday. This has brought together people of all faiths and no faith to help those most in need. Most people from the homeless centre treat me with the same respect as they treat other people. Not once have I had a comment or negative reaction from anyone. Even if they see me in the street or city centre they will acknowledge me."

Julie Siddiqi, executive director of the Islamic Society of Britain, who converted to Islam in 1995, believes the niqab is unnecessary but worries that there has been an overreaction to it. "It's pathetic that some people are presenting this as a national issue", she said. "This is a few thousand women and we need to keep that in perspective."

"I've never worn it and never would, because I don't think it's necessary as part of the faith, but it's a relatively small number of women that do and banning it by law is not the way to go. Also, to use the niqab to somehow make out that Muslims are a threat to this country is stupid and damaging and stirs up unnecessary hatred generally towards Muslims."

Rabiha Hannan, co-editor of *Islam and the Veil*, a book which examines Muslim women's use of face and hair covering, believes that people's fears about those wearing niqabs and burqas need to be addressed.

"If people feel it's intimidating then we need to talk about that," she says. "You can't dismiss people's apprehension as being islamophobic or racist if they have a sense that it's intimidating. You have to recognise that we're in a country where people are not used to seeing others with their face covered. We use facial expressions as a way of communicating with each other."

Ms Hannan added: "I haven't found any evidence to show this is something fundamental in Islam but there is a very small minority which feels that it is. But I don't think it's right that people are proposing draconian laws. I don't think that's the British way of doing things."