

## ACTIVITY

This essay is from the *Columbus Dispatch*, an Ohio newspaper with a weekly "First Person" forum that features articles by readers. At the time, the author was a high-school senior. Analyze the rhetorical situation, paying close attention to the persona of the speaker, the context, the subject, the intended audience, and the purpose.

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### For Teenager, Hijab a Sign of Freedom, Not Stricture

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*Why would you wear that? Aren't you hot under it? Are you bald?*

Such questions are among those I field most every day.

Other people see my headscarf but cannot see why I make such a religious commitment.

As a Muslim-American, I frequently have to explain my hijab. I don't mind; I love that some people are curious about why I stand out.

But nothing could have left me more fascinated, or utterly shocked, than this recent question: *Why does your religion denigrate women?*

I felt offended, disappointed, and heartbroken.

I'd met the girl in the lunch line during a summer program I was attending. She asked the question with the deepest sincerity. Evidently, to many other people, my religion cruelly symbolizes the oppression of women.

Eventually overcoming my bewilderment, I smiled, and responded: "Good question. But you've got it all wrong."

When outsiders look at the politics and culture of the Middle East, they inevitably see overwhelming male dominance. But culture and religion are not one and the same.

Yes, in some parts of the Islamic world, unfortunately, women are victims — victims of compulsory hijab, domestic violence, rape, stoning and honor killings. These are remnants of a medieval world, of patriarchy and of misguided interpretation of the Quran.

Moreover, in the world today, excellent women are often defined by their relation to men. Many people can't comprehend the

process of hijab as an expression of mutual respect, equality, and social harmony for both women and men. Hijab isn't merely a cloth around the head; it is an observance, a way of life, an expression of oneself.

Hijab for men primarily exists in dignified actions and manners. In the same way, women express hijab, but they also can choose to adopt a visible symbol.

My decision to observe hijab, the greatest gift I've ever given myself, confirms my status as a Muslim without altering my commitment to feminism.

For most of my life, I was the image of the typical American girl: long hair flowing, eyes sparkling, skirt perfectly fitting.

More recently, since I started high school, I have made room for an addition to my morning routine: As I get dressed, I might go for my favorite Abercrombie skinny jeans and long-sleeve T-shirt. But then I secure my hair with an elastic tie, carefully wrap my scarf along the rim of my face, drape it over my bun, and adjust any wrinkles along the edge.

What I reveal by the covering has a meaning entirely emblematic of my feminism. And I walk out the door consciously aware that I stand out.

By choosing hijab, I display who I am. But I choose to emphasize other aspects of myself that form my identity: my character, intellect, quirky personality, and illusory hopes and dreams — my inner-existence. By choosing hijab, I liberate myself from the shackles of the status quo, the same way a feminist counters social conformity. When others interact with me, they